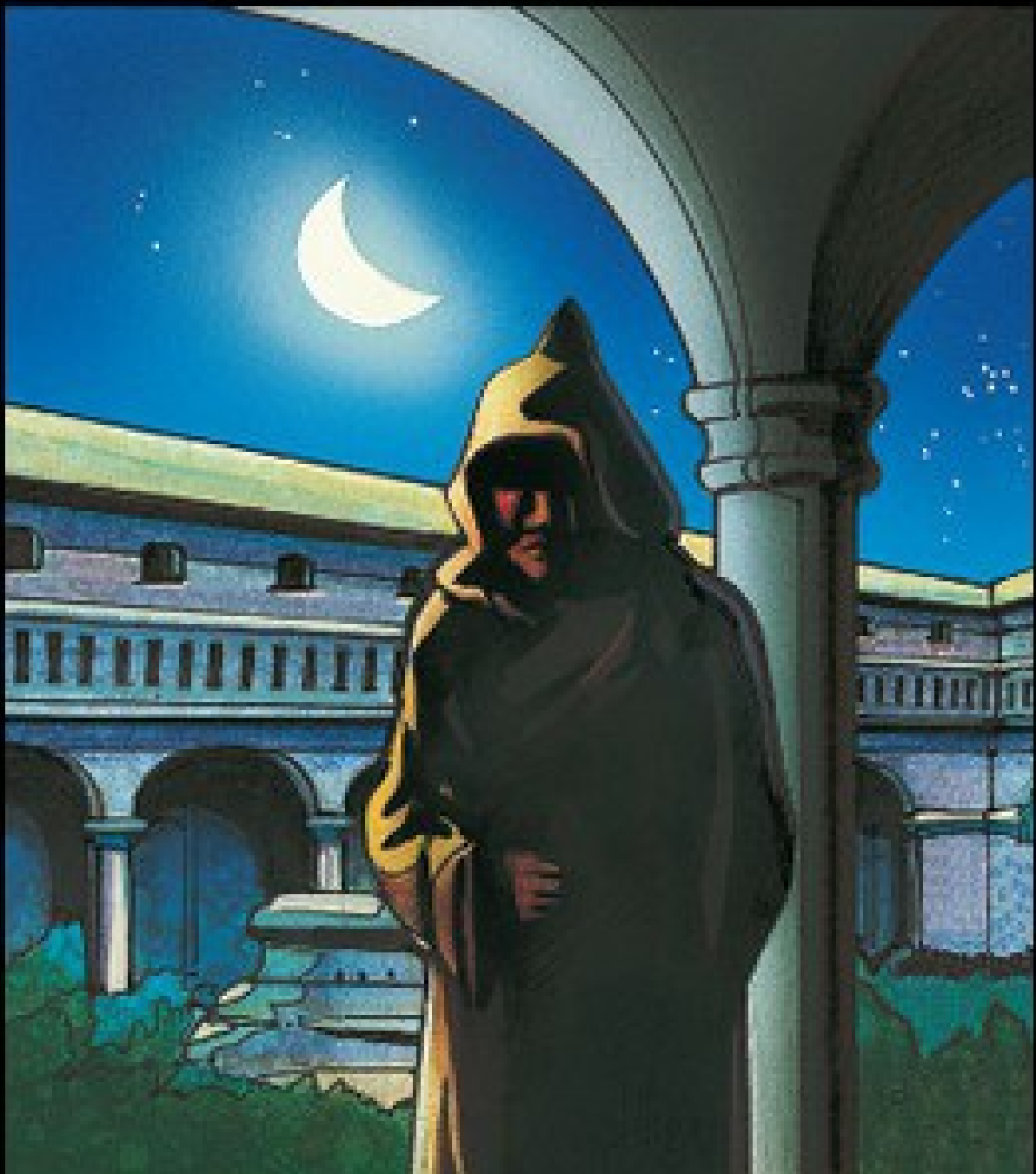


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE MASTER THIEF'S LEGACY





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
MASTER THIEF'S LEGACY**

Victor Hugonay is dead! The famous master thief and arch-rival of The Three Investigators leaves a mysterious letter giving clues to the hidden location of six stolen paintings. The three detectives pick up the trail, but it only leads to more puzzles. At the same time, Jupiter, the First Investigator, is behaving strangely and lets himself be distracted from his work. Then when a mysterious stranger appears and goes after the paintings, the situation gets dangerous. Will the three detectives solve the last puzzle and find the paintings first?

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Master Thief's Legacy

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1. Brittany

“Excuse me, do you work at this junkyard?” the voice of a young woman asked.

Jupiter Jones was sitting at an outdoor table, hunched over a thick, written book, and holding a pencil. He was pondering over a confusing list in his uncle’s scribbled handwriting—the records of new items. If Jupiter looked up now, he would lose the line in the list and would have to start all over again.

“Salvage yard,” he answered absent-mindedly, “this is The Jones Salvage Yard, not a ‘junkyard’.”

“Sorry, I was naïve enough to think that a place full of old rubbish is a junkyard, how stupid of me,” she said.

Now Jupiter looked up—directly into a mocking smile—and into the most sparkling light blue eyes he had ever seen. She was not much older than he was, and she was incredibly pretty.

“Well, you know... it really is a junkyard. But we don’t just have junk, but also second-hand items. That’s why it’s a salvage yard. Do you get it?” What was this nonsense he was talking about?

“Yeah, sure, I understand. And you work in this... uh... salvage yard?”

“Yes. I’m my uncle’s nephew.”

The smile turned into a broad grin, exposing perfect, gleaming white teeth. “Most nephews are.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re your uncle’s nephew. Or your aunt’s.”

Jupiter collapsed inside. “I meant—”

“I am looking for old advertising signs. Do you have something like that?”

“Of course! What do you need?” Jupiter gratefully jumped at the change of subject. “Signs for washing powder? Or cigarettes? Beer?”

“Coca-Cola. My father collects stuff like that. It’s his birthday soon. I think these signs are a bit old-fashioned, but he loves them.”

“Come along,” Jupiter got up from where he was working, closed the book, and led the girl across the yard. There were heaps of junk everywhere, and in between there were tables with all sorts of second-hand items that Uncle Titus had collected—old lamps, clocks, chairs, door frames, tools, piggy banks, crockery, pictures, books, shoes, fishing equipment, model airplanes, children’s toys, audiotapes, coffee pots and hat boxes. With Titus Jones, there was nothing that did not exist. This was well-known in Rocky Beach and the whole surrounding area and his small family business was very proud of it.

“Coat hangers, jewellery boxes, radios—and enamel signs,” Jupiter said. “Here we are. You’re in luck, there are a few Coke signs.”

“The Santa Claus thing looks great.” She chose one sign and looked closer at the bulbous-nosed, smiling man with the white beard, red cap and Coke bottle in his hand.

“Did you know that Coca-Cola helped shape the image of Santa Claus, as we know him today, with his red and white clothes and his beard?” Jupiter smiled superiorly. “They

claimed that they standardized this image for their advertisements. And now all the kids think Santa Claus really looks like that. This is a common misconception.”

“Oh? You know how Santa really looks like?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’s this Coca-Cola thing.” Jupiter reaped an admiring glance. “That’s a modern legend. The company’s first Santa Claus advertisement appeared in 1931, but many years earlier, illustrations can be found in children’s books and on postcards showing Santa Claus in his typical red and white outfit. But because Santa was also then portrayed in a variety of outfits and forms, even as a gnome, the Coca-Cola Company loves to claim that they standardized this now-famous image.”

Jupiter received an admiring look.

“How do you know all this?” she asked.

Embarrassed, he shrugged his shoulders. “I read that somewhere.”

“Okay. How much does the old piece of metal cost?”

“It’s an antique enamel sign. Enamel is a glass-like material which is mostly used for... never mind.”

“Let me guess. You read it somewhere.”

“Do I talk too much?”

“No, keep talking,” she said with a grin, “I like smart boys. Much better than the idiots at my school.”

“R... really?” Jupiter’s mouth was dry and he didn’t know what to say. Normally, that never happened. It was a very disturbing state.

“Okay, so what does this enamel sign cost?”

“Twenty-five dollars.”

“What? That much?”

“Sorry, but collector’s prices are now being paid for these signs,” Jupiter said. “This one is from 1957 and twenty-five dollars is a good price.”

“Did you read that somewhere?”

“I’d love to give you a better price, but my uncle owns the place and I can’t just change his prices.”

She started to reply, but that was no longer necessary. Jupiter looked into her light blue eyes and said: “Okay, twenty dollars.”

“Twenty dollars for the sign and a little friendly service,” she suggested.

“Such as?”

“You go to the cinema with me tomorrow. They’re showing an old Hitchcock movie.”

Jupiter’s mouth became a desert. He could not make a sound. And apparently he didn’t make a particularly happy expression on his face either, because the girl stared at him in a strange way.

“What do you say? Or don’t you like Hitchcock?” she asked.

“Oh, of course I like Hitchcock, I mean, who doesn’t? Though I’ve seen all of his movies lots of times, but—no problem. I mean, I’d love to go with you. But... why? I mean...”

“I am new in the area. My parents and I only moved to Rocky Beach last week. I don’t know anybody yet. I like going to the cinema, but not alone. And you seem like a pretty nice person.”

Jupiter smiled. That meant he wanted to smile. But his smile turned into a big grin and he could feel heat rising in his face. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Brittany,” she held out her hand.

“My name is—”

“Juupeeterrr!” A loud voice came across the salvage yard.

Jupiter flinched. “That is my aunt Mathilda. When she calls for me like this, it simply means ‘come here’! Wait here, I’ll be back in a minute.”

He jogged over to the salvage yard office. Even though he was quite chubby, he tried to look athletic. Aunt Mathilda was waiting for him at the door, her hands energetically on her hips.

“Why are you skipping across the yard in such a silly way?”

“Silly? Did I look silly?” gasped Jupiter, already completely out of breath.

“Jupe, you should know by now that you don’t look good when you run. Tell me, are Bob and Pete coming over today?”

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“Titus just called, he will be here with a big load soon. You have to help him unload.”

Jupiter sighed, “Okay.”

“He will be here any moment. You have to unload quickly, because he has to leave straight away.”

“Okay.”

“So, call Bob and Pete for help!”

“Okay.”

“Right now!”

“Alright, alright, Aunt Mathilda.” Jupiter turned around and went back to Brittany, walking slowly this time. He didn’t want to make a fool of himself again.

“My aunt,” he groaned. “Normally she’s a really nice person, but sometimes she can be a real drill-sergeant. Sorry, I have to make a quick phone call.”

“No problem.”

Jupiter walked over to an old mobile home trailer that stood at the side of the yard. At first glance, it didn’t look as if it was still in use or as if there were more than a heap of junk inside the trailer.

Brittany followed but looked confused. “Didn’t you want to make a phone call?”

“Yes,” Jupiter answered and opened the door to Headquarters. “The telephone is in here.”

“Wow!” Brittany exclaimed. “What’s all this?”

“This is our office,” Jupiter answered proudly. “Do you want to have a look?”

“Of course!”

Actually, there was an unwritten rule that nobody apart from Jupiter, Bob and Pete was allowed into Headquarters. But the alternative was to say goodbye to Brittany, and Jupiter really didn’t want to do that.

She walked up the small steps and entered the trailer.

“Wow,” she said again. “This is amazing!”

Headquarters was equipped with everything a real office needed—a computer, a telephone, a filing cabinet and comfortable seats. At the back was a small lab and darkroom. It wasn’t very clean or tidy, but Brittany didn’t seem to mind that.

“Feel free to have a look around,” Jupiter said and picked up the phone to quickly tell Bob and Pete.

While he was talking to his friends, he secretly watched Brittany, who was looking around the trailer admiringly, stopping here and there to look at a book or run her finger over the files that were on the shelf.

“OK, now tell me,” she said when Jupiter had finished his phone call.

“What is all this?”

“Our office.”

“Your office?”

“Yes, it belongs to me and my friends. We are... er... detectives.”

“Detectives?” Brittany repeated and raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Jupiter searched through the piles of paper on the desk and fished out a business card and gave it to her. It said:



“With real cases and stuff like that?”

“With real cases.” Jupiter smiled sheepishly. Until now, he had always been proud to report on the successes of The Three Investigators. This time, he was almost embarrassed.

“And you’re not pulling my leg?”

“No, we—”

He was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone.

“Just a second!” He picked up the phone. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hello Jupiter, this is Cotta speaking.”

“Inspector!”

Inspector Cotta was from the Rocky Beach Police Department. He had helped them with their cases several times—though mostly he didn’t want to. However, it was rare that he called Headquarters on his own initiative. Jupiter was surprised... and alarmed. Something must have happened!

He glanced quickly at Brittany, who had puckered her brow and whispered in disbelief: “Inspector?”

“I won’t keep you long, Jupiter. But I just got some news which I thought would interest you.”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember Victor Hugenay, the art thief from Europe?”

“Of course!” How could Jupiter forget Hugenay! “What about him?”

“He’s dead.”

2. Greetings from the Hereafter

“That wasn’t a joke, was it?” Brittany asked after Jupiter had hung up. “I mean about the inspector. Was that really a police inspector calling you?”

Jupiter nodded. “Inspector Cotta. We work with him. At least sometimes.”

“And what did he want? Did he have a case for you?”

The First Investigator shook his head slowly. His gaze went nowhere. “He just wanted to tell us that someone died—Victor Hugenay.”

“Oh no!” Brittany said regretfully. She took a step towards him and touched his arm gently. “I am so sorry. Was he a friend of yours?”

Jupiter laughed quietly. “No, you couldn’t say that. Victor Hugenay is a thief. Or he was a thief—an art thief. He stole valuable paintings all over the world. We had a few cases with him in the past. But even though we could always solve the cases, Hugenay got away every time.”

“Why?”

“Because we could not prove a crime against him. He was always a bit quicker or smarter than we were.” He was silent for a moment. “Oh well, I guess it’s all over now for Mr Hugenay.”

“And now? Are you relieved that you aren’t in danger anymore?”

“Relieved? No. We were never in danger with Hugenay. He was our adversary, but he’s not dangerous. He was not a brutal criminal, but more like a gentleman, who hated violence. He didn’t need it anyway, as he was much too smart. Hugenay would never have hurt us.”

“A gentleman-master thief,” Brittany said. “How exciting!”

“He even talked about wanting to work with us.”

“What, really? As a detective?”

Jupiter laughed again. “Actually, he had rather hoped that we would participate in his criminal activities.”

“Because you’re such clever little fellows,” Brittany suspected, and again a slight mockery flashed in her eyes.

“Right.”

Suddenly, they heard the loud rumble of Uncle Titus’s pick-up truck coming into the yard.

“I have to work,” Jupiter sighed.

“And I have to go home. Shall I pick you up tomorrow morning?”

Jupiter immediately blushed. “Sure!”

“OK, see you tomorrow,” Brittany said cheerfully as she left Headquarters. Jupiter stared after her admiringly until she stepped out the salvage yard gate and disappeared around the corner.

A loud honk tore him from his thoughts and made him flinch.

“Hey, Jupe!” cried Uncle Titus over from the pick-up truck. “Get to work!”

Unloading the truck in the blazing afternoon sun was a sweaty business. Fortunately, Bob and Pete soon came to his aid. Together they found the work much easier.

Jupiter told them neither about his new acquaintance nor about Cotta's call. The work had to be done first. Silently, they lifted the heavy furniture and boxes out of the truck until it was completely empty.

"Thank you, boys," said Uncle Titus. "That was really quick. I have to go right back. If you're still here in an hour, I'll be back with another load."

Jupiter nodded, panting. What else could he do? After all, Uncle Titus allowed them to use the trailer. In return, they sometimes helped him with his work. A fair exchange, even if Jupiter would have gladly given up the trailer in moments like these.

"What drudgery!" moaned Pete as the truck rolled back onto the road. "And on a Saturday afternoon!"

Pete sat down at the table in the yard office where Aunt Mathilda had prepared orange juice and cherry cake. Here in the shade, far from the dust of the salvage yard and with all the delicacies in front of his nose, it was possible to sit and enjoy. "But it was worth the effort!" he remarked.

"Mmm-hmm." Bob munched approvingly. "Your aunt's cherry cake is really excellent."

"What's new, Jupe?" Pete asked, taking another piece of cake. "You're so quiet. And you aren't eating a lot of cake. Are you sick?"

"No, just a bit thoughtful."

"Something new every now and then," Pete said. "Don't forget to pinch your lower lip! Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Victor Hugenay is dead."

Bob coughed and cake crumbs flew across the table.

Pete, who was just about to bite into his piece, dropped it. "What?"

Jupiter told his friends about Cotta's call. "He didn't know much about what happened himself. He just got a note that the art thief Victor Hugenay, who has been wanted for years, was found dead in the French Alps. Apparently he died when he was mountaineering."

"I didn't even know that he liked mountaineering," Bob murmured. "On the other hand, he was athletic."

"Not athletic enough," Pete answered. "Otherwise he wouldn't have had the accident." He sighed hard. "Poor Hugenay. I don't know... He was a criminal, but I liked him anyway."

"I feel the same, Pete," Jupiter said. "I wouldn't have thought that I would feel like this about his death. I am quite sad. We hardly knew him, but I feel a bit sorry for him. He was the only honourable thief we have ever dealt with... if there is such a thing as an honourable thief."

"Well, give me a break," Bob said. "Well, he wasn't exactly Robin Hood. He stole from the rich, but then forgot to give to the poor."

"Nevertheless," said Jupiter. "If all the evil doers in the world were like Hugenay, we'd all be a bit better off."

"You only say that because he wanted you to work with him," Bob said. "You were flattered by the offer of the master-thief."

"Nonsense," Jupiter quipped.

"Of course!" Bob insisted. "There's nothing wrong with that. I mean, if one of the most intelligent criminals of our time wanted me as a partner, I'd be flattered too."

"Still nonsense," Jupiter said. "I give Hugenay credit for always using non-violent methods to achieve his goals. This has nothing to do with his praise. I already know that I am a very intelligent young man."

Pete rolled his eyes. "Anyway, he's dead now. That means we won't have anything to do with him again. And I am very happy about that."

When Jupiter came home from school on Monday afternoon, there was an envelope stuck in the door of Headquarters. Advertisement or bill? Jupiter pondered, desperately hoping for an advertisement. Because if it was the phone bill, he had no idea how they would pay it. The Three Investigators' common fund was once again completely empty. The envelope had his name on it in curved letters that didn't look at all like an advertisement or bill.

Jupiter's heart leapt a little. Maybe it was a letter from Brittany? Maybe she enjoyed their visit to the cinema as much as he did. Jupiter excitedly opened the envelope. The letter was written in clear handwriting with black ink on expensive paper.

Dear Jupiter,

When you read this, I will unfortunately be dead, probably under unfortunate circumstances. But I have planned ahead and asked one of my rare confidants to send this letter to you in case I die. I cannot conceal it—I secretly hope that this news will upset you, at least for a moment.

On the other hand, it is also quite possible that you have already heard about this misfortune. After all, you have always been one step ahead of others. I have always appreciated your remarkable talent, even if it almost caused my downfall at times.

Believe it or not, Jupiter, in the last few years I was always with you in spirit. Through my private contacts in Rocky Beach, I was always well-informed about the successes of your detective team and the associated brilliant achievements of your superior intellect. As far as I could, I followed your cases with great interest, read every newspaper article that appeared about you, and was several times spatially closer to you than you can imagine.

Secretly, I always hoped that we would meet again. Unfortunately, it didn't happen. I would have liked to have pitted my strength against yours one last time, to turn our constant stalemate into a clear victory for one side or the other. But now, fate has beaten me to it. So there won't be another contest, at least not in the way I imagined it.

But how about a different kind of contest, Jupiter Jones? I may be physically dead, but my spirit will stay alive as long as people remember me and my legacy.

There is a secret place where I hid several works of art, paintings which I stole but couldn't sell:

*'Drummer Girl' by Godart;
'Odysseus leads Calypso' by Stevenson;
'The Dark Hunter' by Kollenberg;
'Burglar on a Street Corner' by Stingwood;
'Farmer with Pigs' by Strachinsky; and
'Portrait of My Monster' by Sanchez.*

These paintings are worth millions of dollars. A treasure worth finding, don't you think?

I have thought long and hard about who should get these paintings after my death. Nobody deserves them. I didn't make many friends in my life. And the few who claimed to be my friends have betrayed me. I myself can no longer do anything with the fortune now,

so I asked myself the question: 'What to do with these six paintings?' Should I let them rot in their hiding place?

But then I had a better idea—a final game with one of my most stubborn opponents in the past, the only one who was anywhere near my equal. With you—Jupiter Jones.

So how about a last game? The rules are simple: Find my legacy! If you find it, congratulations, you're a rich man and you're a smarter detective than I thought.

If you don't find it, nobody will, and my legacy will be lost. And you will have to live knowing that there is someone who is smarter than you. Even though I am dead, I will be happy to have beaten you.

Good Hunting!

Victor Hugenay

3. No Interviews Today

As soon as Jupiter had found his voice, he had called Bob and Pete and asked them urgently to Headquarters. The Second Investigator hadn't really had time, but the complaining had died down immediately when Jupiter read the letter to them.

"That's unbelievable!" Bob shouted.

"I just can't believe it!" Pete grabbed the letter out of the First Investigator's hand.

"Hey! Be careful!" Bob exclaimed. "Possibly the letter contains references that are ruined by improper handling of the paper!"

"Oh, nonsense!" Pete brought the letter so close to his eyes that his nose touched the paper. Then he held it against the light. He did the same with the envelope.

"Forget it, Pete, I've already checked the paper," Jupiter said. "I did not find anything suspicious."

"Gee, who would have thought—there's still a final match against Hugenay after all. And the prize is a collection of stolen paintings worth millions!" Bob ran his hand through his hair. "Strange that he should give us a chance to find his treasure! Do you think he's really serious?"

"Well... actually, he's giving Jupe the chance," Pete remarked. "We were not mentioned at all. He doesn't seem to think much of us."

"Surprised?" Bob asked.

"Ha-ha," Pete replied. "Just kidding."

"What do you think," Bob began, "Is he really serious? The thing with him not having many friends and that he doesn't know what to do with the fortune? Why, of all people, does he want to leave us his fortune? After all, we've made his life quite difficult on a number of occasions!"

"Hugenay is a gambler," replied Jupiter. "For him, this legacy is one big fun. As he himself wrote, he wants to put us to the test one last time. He probably had a great time imagining this plan, even though he will not see the result. I'm not surprised that he did this. And if you look closely at the letter, he doesn't want to just leave us his fortune. Instead, he hopes that we can't solve the mystery. He wants to humiliate us, only to triumph in the end. And we can't even get back at him, since he's dead."

"If that's so, then maybe there's no hiding place at all," Pete said. "Maybe the puzzle is unsolvable and he is only creating it to make us fail. Or he wants you to fail. This is the perfect revenge on Jupiter Jones—Give him a puzzle he can't solve and he will perish."

"That's the risk I have to take," Jupiter said. "If we don't solve the puzzle, we won't find out what's behind it."

"Speaking of puzzles," Bob said. "What game are we talking about here? I don't see one. All we have so far is this letter. Or am I missing something?" He looked from one to the other.

Pete stared back in amazement. "Bob's right! We have no puzzle at all! We—"

"Juupeeterrr! There's someone here for you!"

"Oh, my goodness, it's your Aunt Mathilda again," Bob moaned. "If it's about unloading the pick-up truck, I'm not here."

“Me neither,” Pete quickly added. “Or just tell her we have some heavy intellectual work to do right now. Physical exertion is only a hindrance.”

“Better leave the intellectual work to me, Pete,” Jupiter smirked. “You should handle the physical work.”

“Jupe! A visitor for you!”

Jupiter’s heart took a leap. Quick as lightning he rose and hurried to the door.

“What’s wrong with you?” Bob asked, but Jupiter was already outside.

From the outside, the First Investigator took one quick look into the reflecting window of the trailer and saw that his hair looked awful. Jupiter stroked it lightly. He turned and was tempted to jog across the dusty yard, but then he remembered what Aunt Mathilda had said about his running style so he tried to stroll as casually and elegantly as possible. Then he saw Aunt Mathilda with a man by her side. Jupiter lowered his shoulders in disappointment.

“What’s keeping you? Someone here wants to talk to you,” cried Aunt Mathilda and went back into the house.

The man was perhaps in his early thirties, tall and slender. His hair was ash blond and already quite light. He was carrying a leather bag around his shoulder. Jupiter had never seen him before.

“Good afternoon, my name is Wilbur Graham. I’m a reporter at the *Los Angeles Tribune*.”

“Jupiter Jones.”

“Of The Three Investigators?”

“Yes. What can I do for you?” Jupiter asked.

“Well, I’d like to do a story about you three.”

“About us?”

“Yes. On a current event, so to speak.”

“Just a moment!” Jupiter asked. “My partners are also here. I’ll get them quickly!”

A short while later, The Three Investigators stood in front of the journalist and waited eagerly for what he had to say.

“Nice to have you all three on the spot at once,” said Mr Graham and smiled.

“What is it, sir?” Bob asked.

“It’s about some cases that you have solved as detectives in the past,” Mr Graham said.

“To be precise, the cases which are connected to Victor Hugenay.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other in surprise. No one said a word.

Graham seemed unsettled. “I suppose you know who Victor Hugenay is?”

“Yes, of course,” Jupiter said.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard yet. He died in a mountaineering accident in France a few days ago.”

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “We know about that.”

“I want to write an article about him, about his life as a master thief. He was a colourful personality. During my research, I came across that his thieving habits led him to Rocky Beach and the surrounding area several times. And interestingly enough, the three of you had dealt with him in one way or another each time—if I understand correctly. Is that right?”

“That’s right, sir,” Jupiter finally said. “Forgive us for being so silent. It’s just that... we were surprised because we happened to be talking about Mr Hugenay when my aunt called me.”

Pete nodded excitedly. “We have a letter from him—”

Jupiter stepped on the Second Investigator’s foot so violently that Pete lost his breath for a moment.

“Hey! What the—” Pete cried.

“Oh, sorry, Pete, sorry!” Jupiter apologized. “There was a cockroach running across the gravel. Aunt Mathilda instructed me to exterminate every living specimen of the species. She hates cockroaches.”

“And why are you stepping on my foot for that?” Pete asked, annoyed.

“Forgive me, my foot-eye coordination has never been particularly well-developed,” Jupiter remarked. “That’s what my gym teachers used to say. Where were we? Oh yes, the letter! Yes, we were cleaning up our headquarters and found an old letter from Mr Hugenay. From way back, you know—the... the, uh... the second time we met him. Or was it the third time?” Jupiter turned to Bob for help.

“Oh, I can’t remember exactly, Juve,” Bob said. “I really can’t. I don’t know.”

“Oh, a letter,” Graham repeated, frowning. “That sounds very interesting. It would be a great way to start the story. Could I take a look at that letter?”

“No,” Jupiter said decidedly.

“That’s too bad. Why not?”

“Well, this is a valuable document,” Jupiter explained. “I hope you know what I mean.”

“Valuable?” Graham asked, surprised.

“Yes. Valuable to you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“To put it more clearly,” Jupiter said, “how much do you intend to pay for a look at the letter?”

“Pay?”

“A fee, I mean,” Jupiter said. “At least you’ll make some money on your article. What about us?”

Graham looked from one to the other with widened eyes. “From my groundwork on *The Three Investigators*, I read over and over again that you forgo a fee for your work.”

“For our investigative work, that is correct,” Jupiter said. “But here, the situation is somewhat different. After all, our activities constantly result in expenses that need to be covered—through interviews, for example.” Jupiter put on an innocent smile. “Or did you think we would give you the interview for free?”

The corner of Graham’s mouth moved downward. “I had assumed so, yes. After all, a big article in the *Tribune* is pretty good advertising for you.”

“Oh, we’re no longer dependent on that,” assured Jupiter pompously.

“So you are not prepared to give me more information about Hugenay?”

“Yes, I do!” said Jupiter in a good mood. “For a reasonable payment—of course!”

“How much?”

The First Investigator gave a figure.

The journalist was stunned. “This is an outrage!”

“That depends entirely on your point of view,” Jupiter said calmly.

“In light of this demand, I will abandon my plan to write an article about you.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Goodbye!” Wilbur Graham turned on his heels in a rage and headed out the gate.

“What was that all about, Juve?” Pete asked when Graham was out of earshot.

“I’m asking you, Pete!” Juve exclaimed. “What got into you telling him about Hugenay’s letter? Are you stupid?”

“Sorry. I thought it couldn’t hurt,” Pete muttered.

“Yes, it could. I want to know what this legacy is before I tell anyone,” Jupiter explained. “Not to mention a journalist.”

“You’re right,” Pete admitted. “Okay, I messed up again. But that’s no reason to offend the guy like that. He was really annoyed. If there’s ever anything about us in the *Los Angeles Tribune*, it’s not gonna be good.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to get so rough,” Jupiter said. “But somehow I had to get out of that mess with that letter. And it was the best I could come up at that instance.”

“Now don’t get excited, fellas,” Bob said. “Everything turned out just fine. Mr Graham is angry with us, but I’m sure there’ll be no consequences.”

Jupiter and Pete nodded.

“So let us turn back to the real problem,” Jupiter suggested. “The mysterious letter.”

4. Secret Mission

“Fine,” Bob said when they were back at Headquarters. “What do we have? A letter that at first glance is neither written in secret ink nor contains any code. Yet Hugenay asks us to seek his legacy.”

“Maybe there’s something else coming,” Pete thought. “A second letter in the next few days, containing the real mystery.”

“I don’t think so,” Jupiter said. “He would have announced that. For me there are only two possibilities. Number one: There is no mystery in the classical sense, we simply have to find Hugenay’s hiding place by following the last traces he left behind. We have to find out everything we can about him—where he lived, how he lived and with whom, where he went with, what he did and so on. And that means—”

“That we have to go to France,” Pete finished the sentence.

“And probably run into dozens of other treasure hunters and policemen there, all looking for that hiding place,” Bob added. “For the fact that there are still unsold paintings from his raids is probably no secret.”

“Right. So we would have almost no chance of success,” Jupiter said. “There must have been quite a few people who knew Hugenay better than we did. But he wants to give us a real chance, at least that’s what he claims, so there must be a hint in this letter. Let’s have another look at the letter.”

They bent over the paper and Jupiter read the contents word for word a second time.

“Hmm,” he murmured and pinched his lower lip. “The only thing that stands out is the list of paintings in his possession. Bob, you’re more familiar with these things. Do these paintings mean anything to you?”

“Pfff!” Bob did. “Just because I go to an exhibition once a year doesn’t mean I’m an art expert! I know the *Mona Lisa*, that’s about it. Well, I’ve heard a few of the artists before—Stingwood, Godart, Kollenberg. But the titles of the paintings? I mean, they all have the kind of titles, right? Farmer with pigs or goats, Odysseus or Aphrodite, no one other than an art enthusiast would bother about such things.”

“Well, it doesn’t mean anything to me either,” Pete said. “Maybe Hugenay is pulling our leg. In the end the paintings do exist, but they’re not worth anything.”

“Okay, Bob, that’ll be your job. Go to the library and try to find out all you can about these paintings and their painters. And if you find any pictures, bring the books with you. Maybe the puzzle is not in the titles, but in the pictures themselves.”

“This is gonna be quite a piece of work,” moaned Bob.

“Take Pete with you,” Jupiter suggested.

“I don’t have time,” said the Second Investigator quickly, who felt little desire to spend the sunny day in a stuffy, musty library. “I must... uh... exercise. How about you going, Juve?”

“I can’t either,” Jupiter said.

“And why not?” Pete asked.

“Because I can’t.”

“You’re on a secret mission?” Bob asked.

“So to speak.”

“Oooh,” Bob remarked. “How mysterious! I’ve gotta get going if I’m gonna get anything done today. I’ll take the page with the titles of the paintings.”

“I have to go too!” Pete quipped.

As soon as Bob and Pete had closed the door, Jupiter reached for his address book. He had lied. In reality, he had time to accompany Bob to the library. But secretly, he hoped to spend the rest of the day more pleasantly. He reached for the phone and nervously dialled Brittany’s mobile phone number, which she had written down for him yesterday.

No one answered. Not even a voice mail. Jupiter let it ring eight times. Then he hung up in disappointment. She wasn’t there, and she didn’t have a voice mail. How was he supposed to reach her then? How could he—

“Juupeeterrr!”

The First Investigator moaned. “Aunt Mathilda is driving me crazy again!”

“There’s someone here for you,” she cried. “A young girl!”

Jupiter jumped up. He quickly looked into the stained mirror. His hair was still a disaster. He tucked his T-shirt into his pants. No way! He pulled it out again. Not much better, but it hid his pot-belly. Then he stepped out into the sun.

Brittany was talking to Aunt Mathilda. She turned and greeted him with a bright smile. “Hi!”

“Hi. That must have been mind transference. I was just about to call you. That is, I was calling you.”

“Really? That’s a relief.”

“Why?”

“I was just on my way home and happened to be passing by and thought I’d say hello, but at the same moment I was unsure if you were even here or if you had time or something. After all, we just met yesterday, and...”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean, of course I have time. No problem!” Jupe stuttered.

Aunt Mathilda cleared her throat. “Won’t you introduce me to your new girlfriend, Jupe?”

Jupiter turned bright red. “My new... what?” he gasped.

“Well, or how do you say? Schoolmate?” his aunt said.

“Oh, uh, this is Brittany. Brittany, my Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter said. “Brittany doesn’t even go to my school.”

“She doesn’t? So how do you two know each other?”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “Don’t you have something on the stove that could burn at any moment?”

Mathilda Jones grinned at her nephew. “No,” she quipped. “But for your sake, I could pretend that I do. Have fun, you two!” She turned around and walked back to the house.

Brittany suppressed a laugh. “Your aunt is really cool. Who does she think I am?”

“I don’t know. She’s certainly terribly curious. And she will find a thousand excuses to sneak around here.”

“It must run in the family.” She smiled. Jupiter smiled too. Nobody said anything.

“Well...” they both started at the same time—and laughed.

“You first,” said Jupiter.

“I have a confession to make,” Brittany said, lowering her eyes. “I wasn’t even on my way home. And I didn’t just happen to be passing by here.”

“Then what?”

"I came to see you. Not at all by chance, but on purpose," she said. "I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Not a bit. Wanna go for ice cream?"

Brittany smiled. "Sure! I still owe you for the popcorn you got me yesterday."

"But a scoop at most. I'm on a diet." Actually, that was true... for exactly two days.

"I see no reason for it, but as you instantly said, a scoop at most. Maybe we can find a place that sells half a scoop."

When Jupiter came home early in the evening, he felt lighter and more elated than he had felt in a long time.

The gate to the salvage yard was already closed, so he entered through Red Gate Rover—a secret entrance made up of loose boards in the wooden fence that could be pushed aside. It seemed to him as if he had never fit through the gap as easily as he did today. Had he really lost weight? Could a diet show success so quickly? In the end, half a scoop of ice cream had turned into five whole ones. Whatever.

Happily he walked through the twilight to Headquarters. Light shimmered through the trailer windows. Bob and Pete sat in the armchairs with defiantly folded arms and stared at him as he stepped through the door.

"What are you doing here?" Jupe asked.

"Waiting for you," Pete replied, annoyed.

Jupiter was startled. "Did we have an appointment?"

"No," Bob replied. "But we thought it goes without saying that after my work at the library, we'll meet again here!"

"I was busy, so what? I'm here now," Jupiter said. The scowl on their faces did not fade. "What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"He really doesn't know," Pete growled.

"What should I know?" Jupiter asked, puzzled.

"When we arrived here," the Second Investigator began with a threatening undertone, "and that was an hour ago, the door to Headquarters was wide open! But no sign of Mr Jupiter Jones."

"Oh, my..." Jupe exclaimed.

"Your aunt didn't know where you were, she just made some ambiguous comments. At that time, the place was still very busy. A thousand customers were wandering around the salvage yard, any one of them could have easily taken something in here."

"Has something been stolen?" cried Jupiter. His eyes wandered from one corner of the trailer to the other.

"No, at least as far as we could see," Pete said. "You were lucky, Jupe."

"I'm sorry. I forgot to close the door."

"Where have you been anyway?" Pete still asked, still upset.

"I was out."

"Could you be more specific?" Pete demanded. "After all, the door was opened for hours."

"Geez, I just went out and forgot the stupid door, okay?" Jupiter replied, annoyed. "I'm so sorry. But can I make a mistake?"

"It's all right," Pete consoled him.

"If I rubbed your nose for every one of your mistakes, Pete, I would take till tomorrow to finish," Jupiter remarked.

“Oh, don’t get upset!” Pete quipped. “I just wanted to say it.”

“I’ve taken note,” Jupe said.

Bob, who had said nothing, got up from his chair. “That’s enough! You’d better take a look at all the stuff I dug out of the bookshelves today! Because it was a pig’s work, and I’m actually here to proudly present the results, not to argue.”

He took a stack of books and his notepad out of his backpack and slammed them on the table.

“Hugenay’s letter holds more secrets than we thought.”

5. The Puzzle of the Paintings

Bob opened the heavy illustrated books from the library one after the other at the marked places and placed them on top of each other.

"These are the paintings we're talking about," Bob said. "They do exist. They're all from different eras, painted by artists from different countries. But there's no doubt that the paintings are very valuable."

"Then Hugenay told us the truth in this matter," Jupiter noted.

"Not quite," Bob countered.

"What do you mean?" Juve asked.

"It took me a very long time to find the right paintings," Bob explained. "I began my search with 'Burglar on a Street Corner' by Ed Stingwood. But I couldn't find that stupid painting anywhere. There's not a single book that mentions it. However, there is a *Beggar on a Street Corner*, but not about a burglar."

"Beggar or burglar on a street corner, what difference does it make," Pete said calmly. "Hugenay probably made a mistake."

"That's what I thought at first, too. But somehow it did not seem logical. Hugenay has been involved with art and paintings all his life. He even stole this painting! Would he then make a mistake with the title? Anyway, I searched every stupid art book of Ed Stingwood, but I couldn't find one that said 'burglar'.

"So I started on the next painting, 'The Dark Hunter' by Kollenberg. And? ... And it's the same thing again. There is no painting with that title. I was on the verge of despair until I came across a painting called *The Dark Winter*. That could not be a coincidence.

"With the other paintings, I was a little faster. Every title in Hugenay's letter was changed slightly. I wrote them down... Wait a minute..." Bob flipped through the pages and put a list on the table.

"'Odysseus leads Calypso' is *Odysseus leaves Calypso*," Jupiter read. "'Portrait of my Monster' is actually *Portrait of my Mother*; 'Drummer Girl' is *Drummer Boy* and 'Farmer with Pigs' is actually *Farmer with Dogs*."

"And what does that mean?" Pete asked.

"That's what I would like to know," Bob replied. "But I'm sure it's not a mistake or a coincidence."

"Definitely not," Jupiter agreed.

"Maybe he was just playing us for a sucker," Pete said. "And test how long it takes us to realize that these paintings don't exist."

"Not subtle enough for Hugenay," contradicted Jupiter. "No, there's more to it. Hey, I think we have found the puzzle. Now we just have to solve it. What about the paintings, Bob?"

"Have a look at them yourselves," Bob said. "They're just paintings. I couldn't see anything unusual about them."

Jupiter spread the six volumes out on the floor so that they could view all the paintings at the same time. While the First and Second Investigators bent over and studied the paintings,

Bob continued, "I went to the newspaper archives afterwards and did some investigating there."

"And?"

"The six paintings were all stolen from different places about eight or nine years ago and never found. It wasn't clear from every article, but most said that the thefts involved Hugenay."

Jupiter nodded approvingly. "Good work, Bob. Did you find out anything else?"

He shook his head. "That was all. Now it's your turn, Jupe. Come on, solve the puzzle!"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "All right." He stretched his back, clasped his hands and cracked his knuckles.

"Let's see what we have," Jupiter started. "Hugenay changed the names of the paintings. He falsifies them, so to speak. Why? Is he trying to tell us that the works are fakes?"

"The paintings were all hung in museums or privately owned by rich collectors," Bob said. "If they were forgeries, somebody would've noticed them before."

"Besides, that still wouldn't tell us where the paintings are hidden, fake or not," Pete remarked.

"You're both right," Jupiter said. "What about the paintings themselves? They are all very different, painted in different techniques, from different countries and times. Is there, perhaps, anything in common at all?" They stared at the illustrations in the books... for a long time.

"Well, I don't see anything in common," sighed Pete.

"This one is more red, that one more green, and the others more or less colourful. This one has people on it, that one doesn't. This one is abstract, the others are not, but it is not very obvious. I can't really tell. The paintings are as different as they could be."

"Maybe that's the common ground," Bob pondered. "That there is none."

"What does that mean?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," Bob said. "I thought we could brainstorm a little."

The brainstorming lasted until late evening. The Three Investigators racked their brains over the paintings, compared the biographies of the painters, studied the styles, but came to no conclusion.

"My head is already smoking," Pete said at some point. "And I have to go home."

"Good idea, Pete. I'm going as well," Bob said. "Maybe we'll have a flash of inspiration overnight. Shall we meet back here tomorrow after school?"

"Not after school," Jupiter said. "I don't have time then. Tomorrow night?"

"All right," Bob agreed.

Bob and Pete left Headquarters.

"What has Jupe been up to lately that he suddenly doesn't have any more time," Pete asked when he was on his way to Red Gate Rover with Bob. "He is behaving so mysteriously. Has he told you anything?"

"No. But I have a hunch."

Bob was at the salvage yard the next day a little earlier than agreed. It was already dark. There were no lights on at Headquarters. But Bob was not surprised. If he was right with his hunch, the First Investigator would probably be a little late.

He took the key to the padlock out of his pocket—and stopped. The lock dangled open on the latch. Had Jupiter forgotten to lock it again? How likely was that after Pete had hit him like that yesterday?

Bob was alarmed. Someone had been at Headquarters and had forgotten to cover their tracks. Or... the perpetrator was still inside. Bob looked around feverishly. He needed a weapon! In a little pile of junk, he found a wooden bar. Carefully, to avoid making any noise, he pulled it out and held it with both hands.

Storm or sneak? For a moment, he waited with trembling knees. Then he reached out a hand and slowly opened the door. It was almost pitch dark inside. The little light that penetrated through the door and window made him see only familiar shadows.

Bob listened holding his breath. His heart pounded loudly against his chest. But there was something else—regular breaths. Someone was here! Bob fumbled for the light switch and let the lamp on the ceiling flare up. In the darkness, there was someone sitting in the armchair.

“Jupe!”

“Hello, Bob. So early?”

“You scared me to death!” Bob exclaimed.

“Why? I haven’t done anything.”

“Because the lock on the door... why are you sitting here in the dark?”

“I didn’t turn on the light,” Jupiter said.

Bob sighed and threw the bar through the door back onto the pile of junk. “My goodness, Jupe. How long have you been sitting here?”

The First Investigator nodded silently. He didn’t look well.

“Are you not feeling well?”

A shrug.

“Thinking?”

He nodded.

“But not about the painting puzzle, right?”

He shook his head.

Bob sighed. “Okay, what’s her name?”

“Huh?”

“What’s her name?”

“Who?”

“The girl you’ve been acting really weird about for days.”

“I’m acting weird?”

“I’m just saying—the opened door,” Bob said. “That’s never happened to you before. And I didn’t know you looked at the window to see if your hair was right.”

Jupiter was silent for a moment. “Brittany.”

“Brittany. And?” Bob probed further.

“She showed up here three days ago looking to buy a Coca-Cola sign,” Jupiter revealed. “And then we went to the movies. And ate ice cream—five scoops. And she doesn’t seem to mind that I’m fat at all. She’s great.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about her?” Bob asked.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders again. “No idea. I think I wanted something for myself once. The three of us hang out together quite a lot, don’t you think? I mean, hardly a day goes by that you’re not here at the salvage yard. Not that I mind. It’s just that, uh... there’s just not much time for other things.”

Bob nodded. “I know what you mean. But I don’t mind either. But is that a reason to sit here in the dark for hours? Everything sounds great!”

“We had an appointment this afternoon,” Jupe said. “She didn’t show up.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve been trying to reach her on her mobile phone. Nothing.”

“Hmm, well... that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Maybe something came up.”

“And the mobile phone?”

“Perhaps the battery was dead!” Bob tried to cheer Jupe up. “Don’t be downhearted, Jupe! She’ll get back to you.”

“You think so?”

“Sure! Besides, we need you now. Or are you too heartbroken to take our new case?” Bob asked.

“I’m not heartbroken!”

At that moment, Pete dashed into Headquarters. “Who’s heartbroken?”

“Nobody,” Bob said quickly. Jupiter threw a grateful glance at him.

“So, fellas, any luck?” Pete asked.

Jupiter cleared his throat and sat up in his armchair.

“I have indeed been giving it some thought in the last few hours.”

“That’s nothing new,” Pete quipped. “So?”

“I have come to the conclusion that the solution to the puzzle is not in the paintings, but actually in Hugenay’s letter itself. I already have an idea, I just haven’t had a chance to test my theory.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Pete remarked.

Jupiter sat down at his desk, picked up a piece of paper and a pencil and began to write.

“What are you doing?” Pete asked.

“Just wait!” A short time later the First Investigator presented the results to his colleagues:

Beggar on a Street Corner
Burglar on a Street Corner

Farmer with Dogs
Farmer with Pigs

Portrait of My Mother
Portrait of My Monster

The Dark Winter
The Dark Hunter

Odysseus leaves Calypso
Odysseus leads Calypso

Drummer Boy
Drummer Girl

“Wow,” Pete said tonelessly. “I am impressed. What does that tell us?”

“Don’t you find it striking that in each correct title of the paintings, Hugenay replaced a few consecutive letters with some others? He has always remained true to this pattern. For instance, in *Portrait of My Mother*, he replaced the ‘th’ with ‘nst’ and it became ‘Portrait of My Monster’,” Jupiter said. “So in this list, in the correct titles, I have underlined the letters that have been replaced.”

“I can see that myself,” Pete said openly. “What is that supposed to tell us?”

“So I think he is telling us something with the changes he made,” Jupiter continued.

“It’s too much for me,” Pete remarked.

Then Jupiter tore out bits of paper and said: “Well, if you write the changed letters down like this...” He wrote the combination of letters on individual bits of paper. “And then put them together, we have this...”

“Great,” Pete remarked. “EGG-DO-TH-WI-VE-BOY.”

“Hey! Wait a minute!” cried Bob and moved the bits of paper. “What if we rearrange them around? What do you think of this?”

“BOY-WI-TH-DO-VE-EGG? What is this?” Pete asked, puzzled.

“Goodness, Pete!” cried Bob. “Once again, you can’t see the forest for the trees. It’s right under your nose!”

“Boy with dove egg! Hey! That makes sense!” Pete exclaimed.

“Wow, great, Bob!” cried Jupiter enthusiastically. “Boy with dove egg! Do you think that’s a coincidence? Not me! That’s the answer to the puzzle!”

“Great! The question is just...” Pete fell silent.

“What?” Bob asked.

“Well... What does it mean?”

6. Coincidences?

“A fair question, Pete. It means something, I’m sure. Just what?” Jupiter pondered, pinching his lower lip and muttered, “Boy with dove egg... Boy with dove egg... does that mean anything to you?”

“Boy with dove egg. Sounds like another painting,” Bob thought. “But what are we supposed to do with it? Was Hugenay trying to tell us about a painting called *Boy with Dove Egg*?”

“But what should we do with this information? It still doesn’t give us a clue to the hiding place,” replied Jupiter and murmured further to himself: “Boy with dove egg...”

“Boy with dove egg!” snorted Pete angrily. “Boy with dove egg! Do you know how stupid it sounds when you keep saying ‘Boy with dove egg’? What’s this nonsense?”

“This is our only lead, Pete,” Jupe said. “We could check whether there is a painting with this title.”

“The library is already closed,” Bob remarked. “We’ll just search the Internet. Somewhere we’ll find a painting and some information.”

Gripped by hunting fever, The Three Investigators gathered around the computer and eagerly awaited the search engine results.

“There! *Boy with Dove Egg*!” cried Jupiter. “A painting by Pierre Foucault. Never heard of him. Painted in 1912.” He clicked on a link and the artwork appeared on the screen—an impressionistic painting in muted colours.

“Well,” Pete said. “A boy with a dove egg. Who would have thought of it?” He sighed. “I’ll never be able to put myself in the art world. What’s so great about it?”

“This maybe,” Bob replied, tapping on a small printed line of text under the picture. “Estimated value, half a million dollars.”

“Wow,” Pete said. “That’s one reason to be an art lover, though.”

“I’m sure we can also find out whether this painting has been stolen,” Jupiter thought and selected another hit from the search engine. It did not take long before the First Investigator gave an enthusiastic whistle. “Look at this!”

“What?” Pete asked.

“It says here that the painting was purchased by the city of Santa Monica twenty years ago and has been on display at the city’s art museum ever since.”

“That’s really close to Rocky Beach!” Pete exclaimed.

“Right, Pete,” Jupe said “And can I tell you something? I don’t think that’s a coincidence either. Hey, we are on the right track!”

“Another pancake?” Aunt Mathilda held the pan with the fragrant, golden-yellow batter under his nose.

Jupiter forced himself not to look. “No, thanks.”

“But you’ve only had one!”

“I’m not hungry.”

Aunt Mathilda laughed brightly. “Not hungry? That would be a first! Especially when I make pancakes for breakfast. You can’t fool me, Jupe!”

“Leave the boy alone, Mathilda,” said Uncle Titus, looking over the edge of the newspaper. “He knows what he’s doing. Isn’t that right, Jupe?” Titus Jones winked conspiratorially at his nephew.

“I have to go,” Jupiter said quickly, plunging down the rest of the cocoa and hurried out of the kitchen. He had to get out of here! There was still some time before school, but the supposedly clever interrogation of Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus was unbearable.

Jupiter grabbed his bag, left the house and went over to Headquarters. His heart was pounding when he took off the padlock. He was annoyed about it. Did he really expect that she had called and left a message on the answering machine overnight? Not likely.

Jupiter entered the trailer. The light wasn’t flashing. The disappointment hit him like a giant wave. She hadn’t come. She hadn’t called.

He was wrong about her. The First Investigator was just stepping outside the trailer when the phone rang. He flinched, dived back and yanked the receiver off the hook.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking!”

“Hi.”

“Brittany!”

“Yes. I’m glad I caught you.”

“I was beginning to worry.” He decided not to talk about his disappointment and anger. “Where were you yesterday? I tried to call you.”

Brittany’s voice was serious when she said, “Sorry. I’m, um... I haven’t been feeling so good. Jupiter, I have to talk to you. Can we meet today?”

“Sure.”

“Fine. Right after school?”

“Sorry, I’ll be at the museum in Santa Monica.”

“At the museum? What are you doing there?”

“An investigation. I’ll tell you later.”

“Good. Tonight, then?” Brittany suggested.

“I don’t mind,” Jupiter replied.

“Meet me at the ice cream parlour?”

“Okay. But really only half a scoop this time.” Jupiter tried to laugh.

Brittany didn’t laugh. And that worried Jupiter more than anything.

The art museum was a modern building with a lot of steel that shone in the summer sun. It was located in downtown Santa Monica, not far from Rocky Beach. The Three Investigators chained their bicycles and paused for a while in front of the museum.

“Do you think that will get us somewhere?” Pete asked and looked up at the façade doubtfully. “I mean, it’s a museum. All we’ll see there is the original painting. Will that help us?”

“We won’t know anything out here,” said Jupiter. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

It was pleasantly cool in the museum. Because of the bright summer weather, there were hardly any visitors. Only very few people strolled through the winding corridors and exhibition rooms. There was a relaxed and calm atmosphere. Hardly anyone spoke. The only sounds were those of the echoing footsteps on the linoleum floor.

Pictures hung everywhere on the walls—large paintings, small pictures, watercolours, etchings and huge oil paintings. In the middle of the rooms were sculptures—from naturalistic figures to abstract geometric forms. People with thoughtful and slightly

transfigured faces strolled leisurely through the rooms and paused in front of one or the other exhibit.

“Now I remember why I think museums suck,” whispered Pete. “You can’t even laugh out loud here if you think something is particularly silly. Let’s find this stupid dove-egg boy and get out of here!”

In every second or third room, one of the guards sat on a chair and looked at the visitors.

“What a deadly boring job,” muttered Pete. “Keeping watch all day, when nothing’s happening.”

It was not long before The Three Investigators had found the *Boy with Dove Egg*. The painting was the only one hanging in an exposed position in the middle of a snow-white wall. In front of it was a row of chairs. A bald man was the only other visitor in the room. He stood a little aside and looked at the painting vividly. When the three detectives entered, he looked over at them briefly.

They sat down on the chairs. “There we are,” Jupiter said. “*Boy with Dove Egg*.”

“Well. Looks just like that on the Internet,” said Pete. “Who would have thought so?”

For a few minutes, they stared silently at the artwork. Bob, who knew a little about art, studied the impressionist painting technique—many blurred areas of colour that only became clear from a certain distance. As far as he could tell, it was painted well. It was a beautiful portrayal of a boy admiring a dove egg in his hand. Well lit, it was in a nice frame of about a metre square. But that’s about it. Slowly but surely he felt quite stupid staring at the painting like that.

“Do you notice anything?” Pete asked.

“No,” Bob said.

“Me neither.”

Without them noticing, Jupiter’s hand moved to his lower lip. “I can’t imagine that there’s nothing to discover about this painting. It is intentional that the solution to the puzzle is the title of a painting hanging in a museum in Santa Monica, of all places. Hugenay wanted us to have the opportunity to look at it without having to travel halfway around the world. So there must be something to discover.”

While Jupiter was still speaking, Bob noticed a movement from the corner of his eye. He turned around. The bald man was still standing near them and had turned towards them. For a brief moment, Bob was sure to observe something like surprise, perhaps even horror on his face. But when their eyes met, the man immediately turned his head away and looked at the painting again. A little too intense, as Bob thought.

Irritated, the detective also turned his attention back to the *Boy with Dove Egg*.

“Perhaps...” he began, “it’s not the painting itself, it’s about the museum.”

“About the museum?” Pete repeated. “Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” Bob replied. “But we’re not getting anywhere like this. Maybe we should look around a bit.”

Without waiting for an answer, Bob got up and walked purposefully to the exit of the room. For better or worse, his friends followed him.

In a corridor not far away, Jupiter caught up with Bob. “I don’t think there’s anything to this museum, Bob.”

Bob stopped and looked around. Then he whispered: “Me neither. I just wanted to get you out of the room without attracting attention.”

“Why is that?” Jupiter asked.

“That guy there, the bald guy, did you notice him?”

“The one that was at the dove egg painting?” Pete asked.

“Yes. I think he overheard us,” Bob said. “Because he suddenly winced and stared at us. Only very briefly, but I saw it clearly. And do you know what moment that was? When you mentioned the name ‘Hugenay’, Juve!”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely!”

Now Jupiter and Pete also looked around. They suddenly felt watched. But the visitors, who slowly strolled through the corridor, took no notice of them—at least apparently.

“Mysterious,” mumbled Jupiter.

“What do we do now?” Pete asked.

“We’re walking through the museum as Bob announced,” Juve said. “If this man has really been eavesdropping on us, we shouldn’t let anything show. Then we’ll go back and see if he’s still there. Keep your eyes open, fellas.”

During their walk through the building, the three did not have an eye for the artwork. All their attention was focused on the other visitors. They did not see the bald man, but they saw someone else.

“Hey!” Pete suddenly whispered. “Over there, see that man? The guy with the thinning hair—isn’t that that reporter from the *Tribune*? Graham or whatever his name was?”

“Indeed,” Jupiter remarked.

Wilbur Graham was curiously circling a sculpture. His eyes fell briefly in the direction of the three boys.

Pete frowned. “Did he notice us or not?”

“I think so,” Bob said. “But maybe he did not recognize us.”

“To me it looked more like he was just pretending not to recognize us,” Jupiter said.

“Strange. What’s going on? First that baldy, then Graham... Is this just a coincidence?”

“Good question, Juve,” Pete said. “Anyway, this museum visit is not going as planned. Typical.”

“Come, let’s go back to the room with the painting,” Jupiter decided.

When they entered the room, the bald man was no longer there. They were alone.

“Did he leave?” Pete asked. No one had the chance to answer.

Suddenly, alarm sirens went off!

7. Alarm!

The Three Investigators flinched.

“What’s wrong now?” Pete asked, startled.

“The alarm!” cried Jupiter. “Someone is trying to steal something! It’s coming from another hall over there!”

“Let’s go there!” Bob exclaimed.

The three detectives ran out into the adjacent hall. There was a great deal of excitement. The visitors looked around in confusion, hurrying aimlessly around, some were close to panic. The uniformed guards, on the other hand, all ran purposefully in one direction and shouted commands into their walkie-talkies.

“We’ll follow them!” Jupiter decided and ran after the nearest guard.

The alarm was still shrilling so loudly that it hurt the ears. The three detectives weren’t the only ones following the guard. About half of the visitors ran in the same direction. The others pressed themselves anxiously against the wall and waited for the guards to pass.

“Jupe!” Bob suddenly shouted and stopped.

“What?”

“There!” He pointed to another corridor.

At the end, the bald man made a quick step straight around a corner. He behaved different from the other visitors—as if he was pursuing a clear goal.

“He’s going back to the dove egg!” Bob cried.

Jupiter paused. It only took him a second to draw a conclusion: “This is a diversionary tactic! Go after him!”

The Three Investigators turned around and ran down the corridor where the bald man had disappeared. It was not long before they reached the dove-egg hall. It was deserted. Except for the stranger, who at that moment was taking the painting off the wall.

“Stop!” cried Jupiter.

The man winced and dropped the painting in shock. The frame crashed to the floor and parts of the wood shattered. Something small and white sailed onto the floor.

The Three Investigators ran towards the man. The bald man only hesitated for a moment. Then he quickly grabbed a chair and hurled it at the three of them. Jupiter and Pete could just about swerve, but Bob was hit in the head by a chair leg.

“Bob!” cried Pete as his friend staggered to the ground.

Bob held his forehead and moaned. A small trickle of blood ran out from under his hand. “No harm done,” he pressed out.

“You’re bleeding!” Pete cried.

“So what?” Bob shouted. “Go on, chase that guy!”

Jupiter and Pete hesitated for a moment.

“I’ll be fine, now run, or he’ll get away!” Bob urged them.

Finally, the two broke free and stormed after the bald man. Then a tall man appeared out of nowhere and blocked their way. “Oh, no! You can’t get away from me!”

“Mr Graham!” cried Jupiter in surprise.

“Yes, you’re amazed, aren’t you, Jupiter Jones? I’ve got you figured out!”

“Let us pass!” Jupiter exclaimed. “The man who tried to steal the painting will get away!”

“You can save your tricks, Jupiter. I’m not that stupid.”

“What are you talking about?” Pete growled reluctantly and tried to push himself past Graham. But the reporter was surprisingly quick. He grabbed Pete’s arm and held him tight.

“Guards!” he shouted down the hall. “Over here!”

“Mr Graham!” Jupiter exclaimed. “Whatever you think, you’re barking up the wrong tree!”

Meanwhile, Bob was back on his feet and together with Juve he pushed past Graham. But it was too late. Four guards were already walking down the hall.

“Over here!” Mr Graham shouted to the guards. “Arrest those three boys! They tried to steal the painting!”

The First Investigator was about to make a well-formulated protest when he heard the clicking of guns. It all happened very quickly. Within seconds, the three detectives were surrounded. They were thrown around brutally, their arms turned to their backs and before they knew what was going on, they were already handcuffed and sitting on three chairs looking into the gloomy faces of the uniformed men.

“This is a mistake!” cried Pete.

“It’s not us you should be arresting, it’s the bald man!”

“I was watching the three boys,” Graham said to a man in uniform. “They tripped the alarm.” But the uniformed man did not react at all. He was part of the museum’s security staff and was only responsible for preventing the suspects from escaping.

He left the rest to the police. They appeared two minutes later in the form of a red-haired, beefy inspector who looked at them suspiciously. He was accompanied by one of the museum staff.

“I’m Inspector Berger from the third precinct. What have we here? Three brats who wanted to see what happens when you pull down a painting in a museum and set off the alarm?”

“No, sir,” Jupiter replied calmly. “Nothing of the sort. We merely surprised the perpetrator and tried to prevent him from escaping. However, we were stopped by Mr Graham, who falsely accused us of having triggered the alarm. If you prevent visitors from leaving the building, the perpetrator may still be in the museum. It is a bald man in a light-coloured suit.”

Berger frowned. But he did not get the chance to answer.

“These boys are lying, Inspector!” cried Graham. “I caught them trying to steal the painting! If I hadn’t stopped them, they would have got away!”

The inspector smiled tiredly. “They certainly wouldn’t. When the alarm went off, all exits were automatically sealed.”

“Really?” cried Jupiter. “Then the culprit is still here! Please, Inspector, have your men search the museum! The bald man must still be here! The fingerprints on the picture frame will prove that he was the culprit!”

Berger hesitated. He took turns looking from Jupiter to Mr Graham. Then he waved one of his men over. “Do as the boy suggested, Miller. Then we’ll see if he’s telling the truth. And while you’re at it, get the names of all the visitors.”

“May we come with you, sir?” Jupiter asked. “We can identify the man.”

“Bald and light-coloured suit is a sufficient description for the time being, I think,” said Inspector Berger.

“Then could you at least uncuff us?” Jupiter asked.

“Don’t do it, Inspector!” cried Graham. “They are up to something!”

Berger ignored him and signalled to the museum security guards. Soon after, the three detectives were without restraints.

“But you stay here,” the inspector said to the three boys and then turned to the museum guard. “Have you found out in the meantime how the alarm was triggered?”

“Someone must have touched one of the paintings in Hall D in an unobserved moment. That’s enough to activate the security system.”

“But nothing was stolen there?” Berger asked.

“No.”

“And what about here?”

The man from the museum pointed to the painting with the broken frame, which was still on the floor, and walked towards it. He squatted down to examine it.

“Leave it there,” Berger ordered. “We have to wait for the forensics team to arrive, in case the perpetrator doesn’t confess on his own. From here, the frame is damaged but hopefully not the painting.”

The inspector tiredly ran his hand over his pale face.

Then the museum employee caught sight of something lying on the floor next to the frame. “Here is something! A card!”

Jupiter rushed over as quickly and quietly as possible. He bent down as fast as lightning, picked up the object and put it in his pocket before anyone could beat him to it. “This is mine. I lost it in the commotion earlier.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” cried Inspector Berger and stepped up to him. “What was that?”

“A piece of evidence, sir!” shouted Graham.

“I didn’t ask you!” the inspector snapped. “Give me that, boy!”

“Nothing matters, sir!” Jupiter said.

“I said give it to me!” the inspector insisted.

Obediently Jupiter pulled the card out and handed it to the inspector.

“The Three Investigators,” Berger read aloud, skimming the rest of the card. “What’s this all about?”

“This is our business card.”

“Investigators?” Berger mocked. “This just gets better and better.”

“If you don’t believe us, call Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police!” Pete suggested. “He knows us.”

“These boys are imposters,” Wilbur Graham said again. “They’re playing a double-crossing game with you! Pretending to be innocent when they almost stole a valuable painting!”

“Listen, whoever you are,” Inspector Berger snapped at the reporter. “It takes a little more than that to steal a painting from a museum! You can see how far the thief got with the painting—about 1 metre! And as far as these three guys are concerned, they’re nothing more than harmless boys playing detectives, whereas you annoy me a lot, so shut up!” Jupiter suppressed a laugh.

It took quite a while before the police combed through the museum, secured the fingerprints and recorded the personal data of all visitors. During the whole time, the three detectives wandered up and down the hall under guard. Wilbur Graham did not let them out of his sight, but had decided to remain silent.

Finally, Miller entered the room and reported to the inspector: “We have searched the entire museum and taken down all the personal details, sir. There is no bald man with a light-coloured suit in the building.”

“What?” cried Jupiter. “But that is impossible! He must still be here!”

Inspector Berger angrily turned to the First Investigator. “I guess I was wrong about you after all.”

“No, sir, you did not. Believe me, that man was here!” Jupiter cried.

“It’s not often that someone takes me for a ride, I’ll give you that,” the inspector said.

“I told you so, Inspector!” cried Graham.

“Shut up!”

“Inspector,” Miller said. “I spoke to Inspector Cotta from Rocky Beach. He actually knows the three of them.”

“And?”

“His reaction was a little strange. He said he was glad that for once another inspector had to deal with them. But still he puts his hand up for them and assures them that the boys are innocent.”

Berger remained silent and pondered.

“Sir, the museum patrons are getting restless,” Miller said. “They want to go home. Should I be the one... to take fingerprint logs to compare with the prints on the frame? That would take several hours...”

“No, let them go. Nothing’s been stolen,” Inspector Berger decided. “It was probably really just a stupid, nerve-wracking prank. Enough of this. Send these people home. And you three go too. Go on, get out of here!”

A few minutes later, The Three Investigators were on the street together with all the other people. The museum was closed for the rest of the day. People talked about the mysterious incident in small groups. Only Wilbur Graham seemed to be sure of his case.

“You can’t fool me, you three!” he said in a rage. “I know what you’re up to!”

“Mr Graham,” Jupiter began matter-of-factly. “I can imagine that you are a little annoyed about the interview, but to slander us in such a way is out of proportion to our fee claim!”

“Don’t try to wrap your fancy speeches around my finger, you wise guy!” Graham warned. “I’ve got you figured out! And I’m gonna put a stop to you!”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bob exclaimed.

“Oh yes, you do! You are in cahoots with this thief! No matter how much you may plead your innocence, I know I’m right.” With that, he turned around and fought his way through the crowd.

The Three Investigators looked at him with irritation.

8. Darkness

Mario's Ice Palace was a brightly-coloured place with neon lights. On the walls hung televisions with music videos flickering constantly. When Jupiter entered the ice cream parlour, the screens were showing a Janet Jackson video.

Jupiter searched the moderately occupied tables with his eyes and finally discovered Brittany in the far corner of the room. Lost in thought, she crushed a beer mat.

"Sorry I'm a little late, but you wouldn't believe the day I've had!" Jupiter said.

"At the museum?"

"Exactly there."

"I always thought museums were boring."

"Not if you go with The Three Investigators."

"I must try that sometime." She smiled, but it was not as radiant as usual. But before Jupiter could ask, she continued: "There are giant ice cream cups for two people! Shall we take one?"

"Half a scoop for me and the rest for you? I don't mind."

Brittany waved the waiter over. "A giant cup, please. No, wait. Two giant cups."

"Two?" the waiter said.

"Two?" Jupiter asked.

"Two!" Brittany confirmed. "We can take them." The waiter left. "So, tell me, what was so exciting about the museum?"

Jupiter told her about the latest developments in the case.

Brittany listened intently. "And you didn't know this bald guy?"

"No. Never seen him before."

"How did he escape from the museum? Through a window?"

"You can't open them at all," said Jupiter. "We just don't know."

"And that weird reporter? Why has he suddenly gone so crazy?"

"This is the question that concerns us most at the moment, although it may have nothing to do with the case. If Graham just happened to be at the museum and took the opportunity to get us in trouble, then there is no connection between him and the case. But we can't really believe that. On the other hand, he did stop us chasing after the bald man, so they might be working together."

"Very tricky," Brittany thought.

"But tell me... you wanted to talk to me. About our date yesterday... and everything."

Brittany nodded. "Yeah. You're right. I did distract from the subject, didn't I?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I wanted to come. It's just that... I wasn't in a very good mood. And that's the real issue I wanted to talk to you about. It's crazy, we've only known each other for a few days, but I still trust you. What I'm about to tell you is... really not easy for me." She swallowed but said nothing.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Listen, if it makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to tell me."

“No, I want to! I like you. It’s just quite difficult. I only found out myself yesterday. And I... I’m afraid you won’t like me after that.”

“I don’t think that’s gonna happen, Brittany.”

She lowered her eyes. “I need to talk to someone about this... Because I don’t know what to do anymore. For a while, I was about to run away from home. My parents don’t know anything yet... Goodness, my parents! They’re probably just making things worse, though I’m sure they mean well.”

Jupiter felt his stomach hardening. The tingling sensation he had felt for a few days suddenly turned into a burning sensation. All of a sudden, he was no longer sure if he even wanted to hear what Brittany had to tell him. But the uncertainty was worse than anything else.

“Brittany, I’d like to help you, but then you’ll have to tell me what this is all about.”

“That’s nice, but you can’t help me. Nobody can. It’s like this—”

The waiter came with two ice-cream sundaes that were so huge that Jupiter had the impression that the tabletop would bend under its load. Apparently hundreds of colourful ice cream scoops had been pressed into the gigantic glass and garnished with countless pieces of fruit and paper umbrellas. A cream topping doused with brightly-coloured sauce was enthroned on top of them. A murmur went through the ice-cream parlour, then a giggle when the other guests noticed their huge ice-cream sundaes.

“My gosh!” Jupiter gasped and dared to laugh. “My dietary plan will never forgive me.”

Brittany didn’t laugh, but poked around in her cup listlessly. And Jupiter had lost his appetite.

For a while they ate in silence. Then suddenly, Brittany spoke on without looking up. It was as if she was talking to herself. “I have an eye disease... A genetic condition. I always knew that. So far, it has had no impact on my health. The doctors always said the disease was only latent, it would probably never break out and I didn’t have to worry. Nevertheless, I went for a check-up every six months. Just routine, just to be sure, you know? Like yesterday.”

Jupiter’s stomach cramped up. “And?”

“It happened. The disease has broken out.” Helplessly, she poked around in the ice. “It... there is a chance to operate, but it’s expensive, and my parents don’t have money for it. Neither do I, of course. Nobody has that kind of money.”

Jupiter let his spoon sink. “And what does that mean?”

Brittany looked up and looked at him for a long time. She studied his face as if she’d never seen it before. Or as if she was trying to memorize it in her mind.

Then she said, “This means that in a few months, I will go blind.”

9. The Trump Card

It was dark. Pitch-dark. Jupiter had switched off the lights and drawn the curtains so that not even the faint moonlight penetrated through the windows into Headquarters.

He sat in absolute darkness. Total darkness. That's what it must be like being blind. Jupiter groped for a water bottle on the table. He couldn't find it. He fumbled and fumbled, wiped down a pen, searched further and further. Had he even put it on the table? Or was it perhaps on the floor? On a chair? Somewhere else?

He finally gave it up. No water, though he was thirsty. But he wouldn't turn on the lights.

At some point, the sun would rise and penetrate the curtains with its rays. But then he would close his eyes and keep them closed until he finally came up with a solution—a way out of this darkness.

He and Brittany had been sitting in the ice cream parlour for a long time. The ice had melted into a muddy, colourful liquid in the cups, which the waiter had regretfully cleared away.

For a long time they had been silent, then they talked again for a long time, and remained silent for a long time. Finally, Jupiter had dared to grab her hand and hold it. She had smiled at him gratefully. But he could do no more.

She needed that surgery. And she needed it soon, or the doctors wouldn't be able to save her eyesight. The operation would cost a lot of money. Her parents and she lived in a tiny apartment on the edge of poverty. No rich relatives, no lottery winnings, no chance of recovery. And there was no chance of a miracle.

Money—Brittany needed a lot of it. Even if Jupiter sold the entire salvage yard in one swoop, he'd only have a fraction. A hundred years of vacation jobs wouldn't be enough, even if the vacation lasted all year. Jupiter wasn't sure if there was even an honest profession with which one could earn so much. Probably not. Not an honest one. But perhaps a dishonest one.

Selling six missing masterpieces by famous painters was certainly no easy matter. You had to find people willing to pay such a high price—and to keep it quiet. You had to make contacts and go undetected. You had to be careful so as not to be discovered.

It was a difficult task... but not impossible. And no matter how long Jupiter had to sit in the dark, he was certain. Despite all the difficulties, he could think of no better way to get so much money so quickly.

Fate was on his side. After Hugenay's death, some people may have looked for the paintings, but no one had the slightest clue as to where they were hidden. No one but them.

And nobody suspected that The Three Investigators could find the paintings. To the rest of the world, the works of art disappeared. No one would ever know anything.

Except maybe the mysterious bald man. He knew about the paintings. And by now he also knew about the three detectives. There is only one thing he didn't know. It was the white card that Jupiter had picked up from the floor at the museum, and very swiftly, put it in his pocket. When Inspector Berger demanded that he hand it over, he took out one of their business cards and gave it to him instead.

Now he had a trump card—his only one. But it had to be enough.

“And you’re only telling us now?” Pete cried and wanted to reach for the little card that Jupiter had put on the table. But the First Investigator quickly put his hand on it.

“Why didn’t you show this to us yesterday?” Bob asked.

“Because I had forgotten,” Jupiter confessed. “After all the hustle and bustle in the museum, it had completely slipped my mind. And last night—”

“You didn’t have time, I know,” Pete interrupted him. “You know what, Jupe? I don’t believe a word you say. You are just trying to make the situation extra dramatic, so you didn’t tell us about this card.”

“Do you really think I could have such motives, Pete?”

“You gotta be kidding me!” Pete snapped. “It’s a typical thing you would do.”

While Pete had the usual banter with Jupiter, Bob watched the First Investigator. There was something about Jupe that he didn’t like. He seemed overwhelmed, but that was not because he had spent half the night thinking about the case. There seemed to be something else.

It took Bob a while to figure out what it was—Jupiter’s superiority had disappeared. The nonchalance with which he usually presented his results to them had given way to something else that Bob couldn’t name exactly. Seriousness? Doggedness? Bob was sure that Jupiter was hiding something from them. But he knew the First Investigator well enough to know there was no point in asking him. Jupiter would either come out with the story on his own or not at all.

“So what is it that you picked up from the floor, Jupe?” Pete drilled. “What’s on the card?”

“It’s not a card at all,” replied Jupiter, finally turning the paper over. “It’s a photograph.”

Bob and Pete immediately leaned over the photo. It showed a building. It looked like a miniature Spanish church, about three metres high with a tiny tower on the blue-tiled roof. The little house was whitewashed, had small, glassless windows and a wooden door with a small cross hanging over it. In the background, there was a well and orange trees hanging full of fruit.

“What is this?” Pete asked.

“A house,” Bob replied. “Seems like nobody lives in it. Looks more like... yeah, like a garden shed or something, right? Of a mansion. A millionaire’s tool shed. Very fancy, but too small for anything else. Why is this photo so tiny?”

“I suppose it was hidden somewhere in the frame,” Jupiter said. “I only saw it sail to the ground when the bald man dropped the painting. Perhaps it was hidden between the frame and the painting.”

“And how did it get there then?” Pete asked.

“Hugenay placed it there,” Jupiter said.

“And how? And when?” Pete probed further.

“Probably on one of his last visits to this area,” Jupiter said.

“But the painting is in a museum,” Pete contradicted. “No one can get close enough to hide a photo there without setting off the alarm!”

“But that’s the funny thing about this, Pete!” Bob said. “Hugenay was an art thief! He knew about security systems in museums and all that stuff! Somehow he managed to put the photo there. And he probably laughed up his sleeve at the idea of us trying to crack this nut.”

“Rightly so,” continued Jupiter. “Because if Baldy hadn’t taken the initiative, the photo would never have fallen into our hands. The only thing that worries me about it is that there is obviously someone else who knows about Hugenay’s legacy. And he also knows where to look. We now have a small head start—this photo. But who knows how long it will last.”

“The question now is: ‘What do we do with the photo?’” Pete asked.

“For once, that’s an easy one to answer,” Bob thought. “We have to find the house. This is the next stage of the mystery. It was the same with the *Boy with Dove Egg*.”

“That’s how I see it, Bob,” Jupe said. “This photo is just to tell us one thing—find the house and get the treasure!”

“Or the next puzzle,” Pete sighed.

10. The Modified Hookup

“But how do we do that?” Bob wondered. “How do you find a house you only have a photo of, nothing more? It could be anywhere in the world. It’s impossible.”

Jupiter shook his head. “I don’t think it’s anywhere in the world. Hugenay has played fair until now. He hid the photo in a painting that was available to us. And not somewhere in China, although that would certainly not have been a problem for him either. He wanted to give us a real chance to solve the mystery. So the house can’t be too far away either. Also... look closely, there are orange trees. This means that many parts of the world can be ruled out, but not California.”

“But neither is China, if I’m correct,” Bob doubted.

“But unlike California, there are probably very few Spanish-style houses in China,” Jupe argued.

“Exactly,” Pete interjected. “Quite a bit, actually. This architecture can be found on almost every street corner. So all we have to do is search all of California and we’ll find the house, won’t we?”

“I’m sure it’s around here,” Jupiter insisted. “I admit, that means we still have a fairly large area to cover. But we can let others do that for us.”

“Others? What does that mean?” Pete asked. “You want to hire a house hunting company? Even if there was, we’d barely have enough money to pay for it.”

“I was thinking of something much simpler, cheaper, yet extremely effective,” Jupiter said.

“Speak plainly, Jupe!” Pete quipped.

“We could use the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup.”

The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup was an invention of Jupiter, which they had successfully used many times in their previous cases. Each of the three called five of their friends and told them what was being searched for. Then these friends called another five friends each and so on until the enquiry of The Three Investigators had spread throughout the whole area.

“It’s a good idea, but it won’t work,” Bob said. “You can’t describe this building properly over the phone. After the third wave at the latest, there will be huge misunderstandings. If you’re looking for a flashy car or something, that might work. But a white Spanish house? We’ll either get a thousand callbacks or none at all. Forget it, Jupe. You’d have to send a photo of it.”

“And that’s exactly what I was thinking. We’re going to modify the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup a bit and turn it into a Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup! We’ll scan this photo and send it by e-mail to our friends. They can then send it on without any problems. Of course, we can only reach people with Internet access, so that’s the catch.

“Then again, a house like this isn’t a car. What I mean to say is that it’s probably been there for years or decades. If someone lives near it or drives past it from time to time, they will remember it. In this sense, a house is much easier to find than anything else. The only disadvantage is that this method will take a little longer than the telephone Hookup. It may take several days, because people may not access their e-mails regularly.”

“Then let’s not waste time!” Bob agreed.

Jupiter booted up the computer, scanned the photo and started sending it to all the people in his address book.

"That means that we have to wait and see," Pete remarked. "There's nothing else to do. The bald head has disappeared without a trace, the photo doesn't give anything—so we'll wait."

"Yes," Jupe agreed.

"Great. Because I'm leaving now!" Pete said and got up. "All this investigative stuff has seriously affected my exercise regime in the last few days. I'm going for a swim. Anyone wants to join me?"

"Just a moment," said Jupiter. "I... wanted to talk to you about something."

Ah, so Bob thought. Now he decided to let the cat out of the bag.

"Does Aunt Mathilda have another big job for us?" Pete asked lurking. "Something like: 'Why don't you guys clean up the whole salvage yard?' The last time she said that, we worked for a whole weekend! Never again, I swore to myself—unless she's got a few bucks in her pocket."

"No, it's about something else entirely, although money also plays a role," Jupiter said. "Please sit down, Pete."

"Imagine... Imagine you have a lot of money, but it's not really yours," Jupe began. "You just manage it. And now you can decide who should get the money. It's between the person who actually legally owns it but doesn't really need it; or someone else who doesn't have anything to do with the money but needs it urgently. What would you do?"

Bob and Pete looked at each other questioningly.

"What kind of question is that?" Pete wanted to know. "Could you be more specific?"

"Well... Imagine if you have a million dollars in your hand that a multi-millionaire lost. Would you give it back to him or would you use it to help someone who really needed it? Like... pay for a vital surgery."

Pete pondered for a moment. "I would ask the multi-millionaire if he would use that one million to pay for the surgery rather than build a new pool in his villa."

"And if he says no?"

"Then I'd have to give him back the million, because then he knows I have it. If I didn't, he would turn me in," Pete said.

"And what about the person who needs the surgery?" Jupe asked.

"It would be bad luck then," Pete quipped.

Jupiter swallowed.

"What's with all the questions, Jupe?" Pete asked, puzzled. "What are you driving at? Is it about the paintings? Are you implying that you are considering keeping them when we find them?"

"Forget it," Jupe said. "It was a crazy idea."

Pete frowned. "You really want to keep them, don't you? Are you out of your mind? What do you want with that? Sell it and donate the money to an organization for children with cancer? Do you have the Robin Hood gene in you?"

"I said forget it!" Jupiter cried. "Go for a swim, Pete."

"I will."

When Pete had left, Bob looked at the First Investigator silently.

"What's with you?" Jupiter looked at Bob.

"You won't get rid of me that easily. What was that story, Jupe? What were you trying to tell us?"

"Nothing. It was a mind game, nothing more."

“You mean because nobody misses the paintings and nobody knows that they might turn up soon, we can keep them?”

“I didn’t say that!”

“No. But I know you, Jupe. Something is brewing. And if it’s what I think it is, you better keep your hands off it, or we’ll be in hot water.”

“What do you suspect?” Jupiter asked, irritated.

“That you’re trying to cash in on the paintings so you can use them... I don’t know. To do some supposedly good work. It’s not possible, by any chance, that Brittany had something to do with this? And talked you into taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor, like Greenpeace or something?”

“What has got into you?” cried Jupiter furiously. “I just asked a hypothetical question, that’s all! Why is every word I say being weighed on a gold scale here?”

“Because you never just ask anything for the sake of asking, Jupiter Jones, that’s why.”

It was a windy day. White mountains of clouds drifted across the sky like huge ships and covered the sun again and again. The beach was empty apart from a few joggers, well-tanned surfers and children flying kites. Jupiter strolled barefoot through the sand with Brittany. Now and then the icy water touched his skin and washed away the sand under his feet.

Brittany had called him in tears. She didn’t know what to do anymore. Jupiter had suggested a walk on the beach. Actually, he had wanted to wait until they found the paintings before telling his plans. But Brittany had been so desperate, he couldn’t take it anymore. He had told her about his plans.

“But Jupiter! This enormous sum...”

“We’re not taking money from anyone, Brittany!” Jupiter said. “Hugenay told us about the paintings. On second thought, if we find them, they should belong to us, so to speak.”

“You know that’s not true, Jupiter,” Brittany said. “The paintings are still stolen items. And they will remain so. You can’t just sell them. And to whom, anyway? That’s incredibly dangerous!”

“I’ll think of something.” Jupiter paused. “Brittany! Are you even listening to me? I found a way to raise the money for your surgery! You don’t have to be afraid anymore! Everything will be fine!”

Brittany looked at him for a long time. “I just can’t quite believe it yet,” she said softly. Then she cleared her throat. “What will your friends say?”

“They... oh, they are fully behind me,” Jupiter lied. “Don’t worry.”

“But you haven’t found the paintings yet.”

“We will, don’t worry.”

Brittany grabbed his hands. A hot shiver ran down his spine. “You’d really do this for me, wouldn’t you?”

“What do you mean I would? I will. Yes.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “You are a wonderful person, Jupiter, but I cannot accept this.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” And then he kissed her good night.

11. At the Monastery

It took until the weekend for someone to reply to the Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup. Since they had started the Hookup, Jupiter checked his e-mails almost every hour. But apart from a few nice greetings, there was no success.

It was Saturday night, and The Three Investigators were sitting at Headquarters. The thick air had disappeared in the meantime. Jupiter had avoided at all costs bringing up the subject of money again.

"This waiting is driving me crazy," Pete moaned and drummed around on the table top. "It's now forty-eight hours since we started the Hookup. There must be something coming!"

"If we're unlucky, it'll last until next week," Bob said gloomily. "Assuming most people only check their e-mail once a day, the Hookup has only taken two steps. So three times five times five times five. That will be... uh..."

"Three hundred and seventy-five," said Jupiter. "But the calculation doesn't work out that way, because we didn't just email five people, but everyone we knew. And with the request to forward the e-mail to everyone in their address book as well. So, with a little luck, we've already reached a few thousand people."

The computer beeped. An electronic voice said: 'You have mail!' and on the screen a little man happily waved an envelope.

"Jackpot!" cried Pete. "That should be it. Any bets?"

"Don't get excited, Pete," Bob said.

"No, I've got a feeling someone just e-mailed us the answer to the puzzle!"

Jupiter retrieved the message. "From someone in Glenview Valley:"

Hello Three Investigators,

I got your e-mail today and I hope I can help you. I know that building. I ride my bike past it every day on my way to school. It belongs to the Mission San Miguel, which is located here in the Valley. But don't ask me what kind of house it is. Looks like a tool shed or something. Does it do anything for you?

Sincerely,

Jordan.

"Ha!" cried Pete. "Tool shed! I told you so."

"That was a bull's-eye, fellas! Glenview Valley! We can easily go there by car." Jupiter jumped up enthusiastically, went to the bookshelf and started leafing through a thick book.

"*The History of California*," Pete wondered. "Must we do this now? I thought we were going there right now."

"We do. I just want to be as informed as possible." Jupiter, who had the gift of a photographic memory, only needed to skim through the text to remember every detail. After a short while he slammed the book shut and put it back on the shelf. "Can we finally go?"

“The Mission San Miguel was established in 1782 by the Spanish in California to spread the Christian faith to the native Indians. There are many mission stations in California, most of them are tourist attractions today, but some are still run as monasteries. San Miguel is one of them. The monks there live in the ancient buildings, except those that were destroyed by earthquake, like in 1932, when part of the church collapsed in an earthquake.”

“Fascinating, Jupe,” Pete moaned. “And what does this have to do with Hugenay’s legacy?”

“Nothing,” Jupiter replied. “But a little background never hurts, Pete. When are you gonna get it?”

It was already dark when The Three Investigators made their way to the mission on Pete’s MG. He drove along a deserted country road through the mountains towards Glenview Valley. Along the way, they passed meadows and fields. The moon had not yet risen, but a thousand stars glittered in the sky. Out here, far from any major city, the stars were particularly bright. When they reached an extensive forest area, it suddenly became dark and quiet around them.

“Maybe we should have waited until tomorrow after all,” Pete said. “I don’t think we’ll find the treasure tonight.”

“And let another day go by uselessly?” Jupiter said. “No, it can’t hurt to look around a bit at night. Maybe we’ll find something that would be hidden from us during the day.”

Finally, they reached the valley. The road went downhill and at its end they could see the lights of the small town of Glenview. But they didn’t have to drive that far.

“According to the map, the mission station is on this road,” Bob said. “Just outside of town.”

The Three Investigators almost went past the small wooden sign with the inscription ‘Mission San Miguel’, which could hardly be seen in the dark. A narrow, unpaved dirt road branched off the main road and led into the darkness.

“We better leave the car here at the side of this main road,” said Jupiter.

Together they walked along the pitch-dark path that led through a freshly mowed field.

“Nobody would suspect a collection of paintings worth millions here,” whispered Pete. “What a dismal place!”

“Dismal?” repeated Bob. “Don’t let the monks hear this!” Somewhere in the distance, a dog was barking. Otherwise, it was dead quiet.

Pete shivered. “Creepy here. And we didn’t even bring flashlights. That’s probably a divine sign of repentance, right?”

“Nonsense, Pete. Besides, we’re already here!”

In the silver starlight, a wall of bright quarry stone suddenly appeared before them, in which a rusty wrought-iron gate was embedded. The wall was too high to look over, but through the bars of the gate the three detectives could make out some brightly shimmering buildings and a small church tower further back. A path laid out with flat stone slabs led through a beautifully laid out and cultivated garden. But nowhere was a light burning and no sound could be heard.

“Didn’t you say the mission was still inhabited, Jupe?” Pete asked. “To me this place looks pretty deserted. Not a soul to be seen or heard!”

“What did you expect?” Jupe countered. “TV and radio music? Or a barbecue in a churchyard? This is a monastery! And monks go to bed early, if I’m not mistaken, and they get up before sunrise. San Miguel is not abandoned. Look at the lawn, it’s freshly mowed.”

“All right,” Pete said. “But what are we doing here now? Are you trying to get the monks out of bed? There’s not even a doorbell.”

Bob stepped towards the gate and carefully pushed down the squeaking handle. "Locked."

"Perhaps there is another entrance," Jupiter pondered.

The Three Investigators circled the grounds, but the stone wall was without a gap. The mission was like a small fortress.

"We'll just have to come back tomorrow," Pete suggested. "It's not so bad."

Pete turned to leave, but Jupiter held him back. "Now wait a minute! Are you going to let a little wall like that stop you?"

"Jupe, this is a monastery!" Bob reminded him.

"So what?"

"So what? I don't know," Bob whispered. "It's, uh... somehow not right to climb over a monastery wall! I think so."

"I see no problem there," Jupiter said. "The monks are asleep and won't notice anything. And if you fear divine retribution, I can reassure you—we're doing it for a good cause. We will be forgiven."

Jupiter started to climb over the wall. It wasn't difficult to find a foothold on the rubble masonry, and he came up easier than expected.

"Come on!" he whispered as he stood on top of the wall. Then he jumped down on the other side.

Bob and Pete looked at each other.

"That's typical. We could just run away," Pete suggested with a grin, but Bob had already started to climb. A little later, Pete was also inside the monastery grounds.

The monastery garden was full of blooming flower and vegetable beds. Plant after plant had been lovingly grown and tended here. Small irrigation ditches protected the plants from drying out.

"Hopefully nobody saw us climbing the wall," Pete whispered.

"They're all asleep, I told you," assured Jupiter and set off.

The main path through the garden led directly to the church, which stood out black against the star-studded night sky. To the right of it was an elongated, flat house, probably the living quarters. And all around the garden there were other buildings, a small chapel, former stables and—

"Hey!" Pete whispered, pointing to the bright stone building to his right. "Doesn't that look familiar?"

Blue tiles covered the roof, out of which protruded a turret. A wooden cross hung over the old weathered door.

"This is it, fellas!" Jupe cried.

They crept through the garden towards the building. Behind it was a tiny orange grove with a small irrigation well—just like in the photo.

"We found it!" whispered Jupiter. "Let's go in!" He pulled the door handle. The heavy oak door was unlocked and swung open with a loud squeak. The sound broke through the night's silence like a cannon beat and echoed off the stone wall. A bird croaked and flapped up. The Three Investigators froze. Now that could wake up the monks!

For a minute, they did not move and hardly dared to breathe. They stared spellbound at the living quarters. All windows remained dark.

"That was just fine," Bob finally whispered.

They entered the building. It was a single room. A room that was largely empty. Through the door and narrow windows, there was enough light to see the garden tools hanging on the walls and standing in the corners. A few bags of soil were piled on the floor. That was all.

“And where is the treasure now?” whispered Pete after he had given in to disappointment for a moment.

Jupiter wanted to suggest that the storehouse be searched. But there was nothing to search. There was nothing here, they could see that at a glance. The walls were made of stone, the floor was of rammed earth and the roof was supported by four thick wooden beams. Not even theoretically was there a place to hide six valuable paintings. They searched for a while anyway. Bob looked under the sacks, but basically they knew they wouldn’t find anything there. Nobody would think of hiding millions of dollars worth of paintings in a place like this, which was so vulnerable to the weather.

“There was probably nothing,” sighed Pete.

“Perhaps there is more to see in the daytime,” pondered Jupiter.

Everyone wanted to cling to this glimmer of hope, but no one really believed that they would find more in daylight than they did now.

“We’ll come back tomorrow,” the First Investigator decided.

Then the three of them began to retreat.

Jupiter left the door open to avoid another squeak. He doubted that anyone would notice. They went back to the wall and climbed to the other side.

Only then, Pete dared to speak again at normal volume: “Do you really think we’ll have more success tomorrow, Juve?”

“I hope so,” replied the First Investigator. “Otherwise I’m stuck. If tomorrow we don’t —” That was as far as he got.

Suddenly a dark figure shot out of the shadow of the wall and pounced on Jupiter. It grabbed the First Investigator, pulled him around and twisted his arm on his back. Everything happened so quickly that Jupiter didn’t even have a chance to scream before he felt the cold barrel of a pistol at his temple.

“Got you at last, guys!” hissed the man.

His bald head glowed in the starlight.

12. Spiritual Assistance

“So, now tell me. What’s your connection with Bregovic? Or did you work with Hugenay? Did he send you here?”

The three detectives were petrified. The man had emerged so suddenly from the darkness that they had no time to react. But there was no doubt about one thing—it was the bald man from the museum!

“Answer!” he hissed and pressed the gun even harder against Jupiter’s head. “You know where the paintings are, don’t you? Are they here with the monks?”

No one said a word.

“N... no,” Jupiter finally croaked.

“You’re lying,” growled the man. “What else were you doing here in the middle of the night?”

Jupiter’s thoughts were racing. Who was that man? What did he want from them? What could he tell him? One thing was certain—he was dangerous! And he was hunting for the paintings, but had no idea where they were—because he had never seen the photo of the mission building.

“We... we thought they were there,” Jupiter finally stammered. “But we were wrong.”

“Let him go,” Pete suddenly shouted as loud as he could.

“Shut up!”

But the Second Investigator didn’t even think about it. The monks might not have been woken by a squeaky door. But when they screamed so loudly right outside their wall...

“You should let him go!” Bob joined in. “We don’t know anything about any paintings!”

“That is a lie! You know where they are! Don’t you, fatso?” the man insisted. “Tell me, or shall I pull the trigger? Where... are... the... paintings?”

“They are... hidden in another mission station,” Jupiter stammered.

Through the gate, Bob saw the lights go on in the sleeping quarters.

“The monks have woken up. Release him!” Bob cried.

“Where?” the man said.

“Hey! What’s going on out there?” someone shouted from inside the mission.

“Help!” cried Pete. “Help us!”

The bald man glared at him and released the weapon with a sharp click. “One last time... I’m asking you, fat boy, and I want you to answer, otherwise your stay on earth will be over! Which mission station are they in?”

“Pu... Purisima. In the Mission La Purisima north of Santa Barbara,” stuttered Jupiter. “The paintings are hidden under the altar in the church.”

Hasty steps approached the gate. “Hello? Is there anyone there? Did someone call for help?”

“Don’t get in my way again!” Suddenly the bald man let go of Jupiter and ran away. Jupiter fell to the ground. Bob and Pete rushed over and helped him to his feet.

“We’ve got to go after him,” cried Bob.

“Are you crazy?” Pete snapped. “That guy is dangerous!”

Before The Three Investigators could decide to pursue the bald man, he had already disappeared into the darkness. Soon after, an engine revved up on the road and a car drove off. Then it was quiet.

Suddenly someone appeared on the other side of the gate. A small, slim, middle-aged man with brown hair and dressed in a kind of night shirt looked through the bars in bewilderment and asked, "Did something happen?"

"We... uh... a man was following us," reported Jupiter. His knees trembled. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by the fear he had been fighting a while ago. His heart was racing and he had the feeling that he would lose the ground under his feet at any moment. Wobbling, he sought support at the steel gate.

"Did something happen to you?" the monk asked anxiously. "What did he want from you?"

"I don't know," Jupiter lied. "But now he's gone."

"Should I call the police? Do you want to come in?"

"No, thanks, we'll be fine."

"But maybe the man was dangerous!" the monk remarked.

"He certainly was," replied Jupiter. "But as I said before—he's gone. Thanks anyway for coming to the gate. I think you chased him away."

The monk nodded uncertainly.

"Good night!" Jupiter said before the man could think of asking them what they were doing here in the middle of the night. Then the three detectives slowly walked back to the street.

"Do you think he's really gone?" Pete whispered after a few metres.

"You heard the car. He took off." Jupe said.

"He must have been on our trail for a while," Bob thought. "We haven't seen him since our encounter at the museum. But he has seen us. Or do you think it's a coincidence that he showed up here?"

"No," said Jupiter. "You're probably right, Bob. He did follow us. Because he never got hold of the photo from the museum. But now he's following another track and he's probably already on the highway heading north."

"He's going to that other mission station, isn't he?" Pete asked.

Jupiter nodded. "La Purisima."

"But how did you suddenly know where the paintings were hidden, Jupe?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator rolled his eyes. "My goodness, Pete! I just lured the guy away! I have no idea where the paintings are." Then he smiled. "But Baldy now thinks they're hidden under some altar."

"Gee, that's great, Jupe!" cried Pete. "No wonder he believed that. I did too."

"Anyway, now you know why it always pays to be informed. The Mission La Purisima really exists, as I read in *The History of California* only today. Otherwise he would not have believed me. In any case, he's on his way there."

They got back to Pete's car, and immediately they were on the way home. This time they were especially careful and kept looking around. But nobody followed them.

"But tell me, Jupe," Bob said. "If he left immediately, he will be in Santa Barbara in two hours. And then he'll realize you didn't tell him the truth. Then he'll come after us again. And then I don't want to be anywhere near him."

"Wrong, Bob," corrected Jupiter. "I said the mission station was north of Santa Barbara. How far north, I didn't say. It'll take him four hours. And then the sun would be rising. Well, also the monks in La Purisima will be early risers and will start the morning mass just in time

for sunrise. And he'll hardly be fiddling with their altar in front of their eyes. Our baldy will just have to wait till the next night. That means we have one more day to find the paintings before he shows up again."

Jupiter paused. "One more day... I hope."

Jupiter stumbled through the darkness. The sun had not risen. A dark night reigned around him. Where was he?

He was groping completely disoriented through the nothingness, through a huge room, or perhaps it was a free space, he didn't know. He needed light! Light! Somewhere there had to be a wall, a light switch or a window! With outstretched arms Jupiter kept on running, stumbled, picked himself up again and ran and ran into the darkness. The realization struck him like lightning. It was not the sun that had set. And it was not that the lights were out.

He was blind.

He woke up suddenly—and looked into Brittany's face.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was at all. Then the familiar surroundings of his room seeped into his field of vision. He was home—in his bed. It was morning.

And Brittany sat on the edge of his bed, looking at him.

"What... what are you doing here?"

"Good morning. I wanted to wake you up. Your aunt let me in. We were supposed to have breakfast together, remember?"

Jupiter took a look at the clock. "Eleven already?" he croaked. "My goodness! I've completely overslept."

"I realized that."

"Have you been sitting here long?"

She shook her head. "Just got in. Did you have a bad dream?"

Jupiter nodded and sat up. At the same moment the anxious question came to his mind what kind of pyjamas he was wearing. Please, not that brown terry cloth with the bear pattern that Aunt Mathilda had given him years ago for Christmas? He sent a quick prayer and looked down on himself. Blue and white striped cotton. Classic. Almost cool. Jupiter breathed again.

"It really got late last night."

"Where have you been?"

"We found the paintings."

"What?"

"Well, almost anyway. But our trail is hot. I must tell you all about it over breakfast."

Jupiter got up, jumped in the shower and got dressed.

Aunt Mathilda had been kind enough to make them a wonderful breakfast on the porch—almost a little too nice for Jupiter's taste. Hopefully she didn't come out every five minutes under some pretext to eavesdrop on them.

"So what happened last night?" Brittany asked curiously and bit into a jam bun.

Jupiter told her everything in detail. When he got to the part where he was threatened by the man with the gun, Brittany forgot to chew.

Finally, Jupiter ended up saying: "We will go back to the mission today and look around in daylight. If the paintings themselves are not hidden there, then there must be some clue we missed last night."

"Just be careful," Brittany warned. "If that guy from last night shows up again."

“He’s probably still somewhere near Santa Barbara,” said Jupiter and grinned. Then he got serious again. “Brittany, about our conversation on the beach, I’ve been thinking.”

“Me too.”

“You should really think twice about this,” Jupiter said.

“I did.”

“You know, they’re just paintings. It’s just money. But your eyesight is priceless. You should have no scruples about taking the money.”

“I know. I’ve been rethinking everything... I’m going for it.”

“What?” Jupiter exclaimed.

“I’ll take the money. You’re right,” Brittany said. “I don’t want to go blind. I don’t... I am just too young for this! I want to see the world and not just remember it. And if that means some millionaires can’t get their expensive paintings back—they just can’t get them back.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

Jupiter beamed. “If this is so, we don’t have time to lose. I’m meeting Bob and Pete right after lunch. Then we’ll go to Glenview Valley together. We’ll find the paintings, Brittany. Today! Do you have any plans tonight? I think we’ll have something to celebrate.”

“Do not rejoice too soon,” she warned. “You haven’t found them yet.”

But Jupiter waved away. “It is only a matter of time now. I promise.”

13. Representation and Reality

During the day, the mission's grounds were no longer scary at all, but all the more beautiful. The magnificent garden was populated by countless colourful butterflies, the buildings seemed freshly painted, so bright white that they shone in the sun. Two or three monks in brown robes worked in the garden, otherwise the place was deserted.

Pete parked his car at the same place, and The Three Investigators walked in through the now opened gate.

One of the monks looked up and came towards them. "Aren't you the three boys from last night?"

Now they recognized him. It was the man who had stood at the gate.

"Yes, we are. Forgive us for intruding. But there's no bell or anything. My name is Jupiter Jones and these are my friends Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw."

"Pleased to meet you. I am Brother Raphael. How can I help you?"

"We wanted to thank you again for saving us yesterday."

"You're welcome. It was my duty to answer a call for help."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Well, that's not all. We... I... how shall I say..."

"Jupiter wants to say that he did not tell you the truth last night," Pete came to the rescue. "Because we weren't here by chance. We climbed over the wall and were on your property. That's why that man threatened us."

Jupiter gave Pete an angry look, while Brother Raphael looked at him in surprise. "I don't understand."

"It is like this," Jupiter explained. "Somewhere on this property are six very, very valuable paintings hidden, and we are looking for them. So was the man from last night. The paintings are probably somewhere in that storehouse back there—although we didn't find them there yesterday."

"There are supposed to be paintings in our storehouse—did I understand that correctly?" The monk smiled uncertainly. "In the past, the grain was stored there. I didn't know it was also used as a gallery. What do you mean you didn't find anything there yesterday?"

Jupiter sighed. "When you have a moment, we'll tell you the most important facts."

"I'm asking for it. Why don't we sit on that bench over there?"

The Three Investigators and Brother Raphael sat on a stone bench. Alternating, the three boys told the monk about the paintings and the storehouse. He listened fascinated and wanted to know everything exactly.

Again and again he asked questions and went into so much detail that the conversation, which Jupiter originally wanted to keep as short as possible, became longer and longer. But the First Investigator had scruples about concealing anything, after all he had a monk in front of him. It ended with Brother Raphael being well-informed about every detail of the case.

The sun was already low and casting long shadows when he finally said: "I am fascinated. A real crime story within the walls of our monastery! Who'd have thought I'd once again be following in the footsteps of Father Brown and William of Baskerville."

"But as exciting as I find this story, I find it hard to believe you're on the right track here in San Miguel. I have lived in this mission for twenty-five years and I have never met anyone

by the name of Hugenay. And I know the storehouse like the back of my hand. If there was anything there besides our gardening tools, I would know it, believe me.”

“May we perhaps take another look at it anyway?” Jupiter asked, relieved to finally be able to come to the point.

“Sure, if it pleases you. I’d like to be surprised if you do find something.”

The small bell of the monastery rang. “The evening service,” Brother Raphael explained. “I must go. Just take your time and look around. I’ll check on you in an hour.”

He got up and entered the church with the other monks, who were now gathering. Two minutes later, the chanting stopped and soft choral singing penetrated the thick walls of the chapel. The garden was deserted, The Three Investigators were alone.

“It’s about time,” moaned Bob. “There was no end to it.”

“Come on, fellas, it would be a laugh if we didn’t find something,” Pete said.

They entered the storehouse and immediately set to work. Pete climbed a ladder and examined every inch of the roof, Jupiter knocked off every single stone on the wall and Bob crawled around on the floor. But the interior of the building was small, so after only twenty minutes they had examined every part in detail—without result.

Then they went outside and examined the outside wall and the surrounding ground. Pete climbed onto the roof and looked under the tiles. They couldn’t find a single clue to Hugenay’s legacy.

“I don’t believe it,” cried Bob in frustration as they sat down on the stone bench, exhausted and covered in dust, and looked up at the first stars flashing in the blue evening sky. “Nothing! Absolutely nothing! And we were so sure! This is the building in the photo, there is no doubt about that. What have we done wrong, Jupe?”

The First Investigator had been pinching his lower lip for a while. “The storehouse is the building in the photo, you’re quite right, Bob. But...”

“But what?” Bob asked.

“But maybe it’s not about the building at all.”

“Then what?” Pete asked.

“Until now, this puzzle has always involved images. With images of real things. Why do you think the building should suddenly matter?”

“I don’t understand, Jupe,” Pete confessed. “What do you think?”

“I think that the photo perhaps did not refer to the storehouse in the monastery garden at all, but to a picture of the storehouse in the monastery garden!”

“You can’t be serious!” Pete exclaimed. “A picture of the storehouse?”

“That’s what this was all about?” Bob added. “Then the paintings are not hidden here at all. Is it just another stage of the puzzle?”

“It’s just a theory,” Jupe replied. “But at the moment it seems the most likely.”

Pete struck his forehead with his palm. “An image! Great! Then all the trouble here in the monastery was for nothing! We have to start all over again! Can someone tell me how on earth we’re supposed to find this painting? When was this monastery built, Jupe? 1780?”

“1782.”

“Great. That’s over two hundred years that anyone could have painted this building. It could be anywhere in the world! We’ll never find it.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that,” Jupiter said.

The monastery church bell rang for the second time that evening. The evening mass was over. The monks left the church and returned to the living quarters of the monastery. Only Brother Raphael separated from the group and came over to them.

“Well? Did you find anything?”

“Unfortunately not,” Bob confessed. “Jupiter just found out that we were barking up the wrong tree. We’re not even looking for this building. We’re looking for a picture of the building.”

“Brother Raphael,” Jupiter began, “do you happen to know if the storehouse ever served as the motif for a famous painting?”

“For a painting? No, not that I know of. Well, sometimes visitors come to our beautiful garden with their watercolour blocks and paint the church. But I’ve never heard of any famous painter being here.”

“Well, the painting doesn’t necessarily have to be famous,” Jupiter said.

“Not famous, Juve?” Bob asked. “But then we’ll have no chance of finding it at all. If some art student from Los Angeles painted it, how will we ever be able to find it? You want to use the phone again... to, uh, e-mail Hookup again? Do you think that’ll work?”

Jupiter shook his head. “No. Maybe we don’t have to go that far. Maybe it’s enough to look around here. Brother Raphael, of all the people with the watercolour blocks, do you perhaps remember someone who painted the storehouse especially? And only that, nothing else? Compared to the church, it’s not very impressive. You might have noticed.”

The priest thought. Then he shook his head slowly. “No. But I remember something else. There’s a painting of the storehouse. It’s hanging in the corridor in the monastery.”

The Three Investigators got a good earful. “Really?” Pete gasped.

“Yes. A former monastery resident painted it.”

“A... uh... monk?” Pete asked.

“No, Pete. A guest. Sometimes people come to us for shelter.”

“As a sanctuary? From where and for what?” Bob asked.

“People from all over. They come for various reasons,” Brother Raphael explained.

“They need a place of peace and recreation to find their own inner peace again. They can live here, eat, sleep and stay as long as they want. For most of them a few weeks in a monastery is a healing experience. This guest even stayed for half a year. He painted a lot. He gave us his paintings in gratitude for our hospitality.”

Jupiter frowned. “Can you tell us when was that?”

“That was some time ago. Eight years... or nine.”

“Eight or nine years ago! That’s when the six paintings were stolen!” Bob remarked.

“Can we see the painting please?” Jupiter asked.

“Of course,” Brother Raphael said. “Come along.”

Brother Raphael led them to the elongated main building of the monastery. They entered the interior through a portico. A long corridor with many wooden doors followed. The walls and floor were all stone. None of the other monks could be seen. They climbed up a staircase and entered another corridor. Here the paintings were hanging on the wall. There were almost twenty of them, most of them quite large. They were in plain wooden frames.

All paintings were painted in oil and showed different views of the monastery, the church and the garden.

“Nice,” Pete thought.

“Yes. We all enjoyed them very much. That’s why we decided to hang them up, though we usually do without any decoration.”

“There’s the painting!” cried Bob. His voice echoed in the stone corridor and Bob immediately regretted having been so loud. It wasn’t proper in a monastery.

“Yes, it is. Pretty, isn’t it?”

The painting showed the storehouse in sunshine. The leaves of the surrounding orange trees cast a beautiful shadow pattern on the wall. The roof tiles glowed in a deep blue—just

like in reality.

“Do you notice anything, fellas?” Jupiter asked.

Pete shook his head slowly. “We should notice something, shouldn’t we? After all, this painting is probably the solution to the mystery. But I see... only the storehouse. Nothing more.”

“Watch your perspective,” Jupiter said.

“Right!” cried Bob. “Now I notice it too! It’s exactly the same as in the photograph, right?”

“Right, Bob. Too bad we didn’t take it with us. I’d almost bet this painting was painted from the photo rather on site. Was the painter also took photographs, Brother Raphael?”

“Oh, yes, sometimes. Mr Bregovic used to take his camera out to the garden every now and then to photograph the butterflies.”

Jupiter flinched. “Sorry?”

“The butterflies. Is that so unusual?”

“No, I mean the name you just mentioned. What was the name of this guest?”

“Samuel Bregovic. Why? Do you know him?”

The First Investigator shook his head slowly. “No. But it’s exactly the name that the bald guy mentioned last night.”

14. The Jupiter Jones Syndrome

“You’re right, Jupe!” cried Pete. “He said something like ‘What’s your connection with Bregovic?’. I had forgotten all about that. What is the meaning of this, Jupe?”

Bob, Pete and Brother Raphael looked at him expectantly.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Let’s reconsider the whole thing. Eight years ago, six valuable paintings were stolen by Victor Hugenay and hidden. At about the same time, a certain Samuel Bregovic appears in the monastery, stays for half a year and during this time paints pictures of the mission station.

“Eight years later, Hugenay dies in a mountaineering accident. His legacy to us consists of a series of puzzles which finally lead us here, and in which one of Bregovic’s paintings seems to play a considerable role—although we do not yet know exactly what.”

“Sounds pretty confusing to me,” Pete said.

“At first glance, yes. Unless...” Jupiter paused.

“Unless what?” Pete asked.

“The theory is this. Hugenay steals the paintings and has to hide from the police. He flees to California and hides in the Mission San Miguel under a false name—Samuel Bregovic. He stays here until the whole thing blows over. But he suspects that he won’t be able to turn the paintings into cash so quickly. So he hides them in a place that is so safe that for half a year the police couldn’t find them—namely here in the mission! And just in case he can’t get the paintings back during his lifetime, he creates clues to the hiding place. At that time he did not know exactly for whom he was doing this for—until he decided that it was us.”

“Impressive, Jupiter,” Brother Raphael said appreciatively. “That’s how it really could have been—Hugenay and Bregovic are the same person! Then we hosted a master thief for months. How exciting! Sinful and wicked, but exciting!”

Pete was also enthusiastic, but Bob was not infected by the euphoria. “It sounds fascinatingly logical, Jupe, but it still can’t be right.”

“Why not?” Jupe asked.

“Because the bald man said something else. Remember? He said: ‘What’s your connection with Bregovic? Or did you work with Hugenay?’ That means that they are two different people. Brother Raphael, do you remember what Mr. Bregovic looked like? Was he tall, slim and dark haired?”

The monk shook his head. “Rather the exact opposite—short, plump and blond.”

“You see,” Bob said.

Jupiter let his shoulders hang in disappointment. “You’re right, Bob. It would have gone so well together. And I’m sure there’s still a shred of truth in my theory. We are very close to unveiling the secret of Hugenay, Bregovic, the bald guy and the paintings, I can feel it! All we need now is a tiny piece of the puzzle.”

“How about the paintings themselves?” Pete suggested. “To be honest, if we find them, I don’t really care about the rest. We have the painting of the storehouse now. And? What do we do with it?”

Jupiter lightly stroked the canvas with his fingers. The dry paint felt rough. “May I take the painting down to check?”

“Of course.”

The First Investigator took it off the wall and turned it over. Nothing noticeable. He looked at it from all sides.

“What are you looking for, Juve?” Pete asked.

“I’m not sure myself,” Jupiter said. “There must be some mystery hidden in this painting. That’s always been the case until now. And each time in a different way. We may have to study this painting very, very carefully in our lab.”

“You have a laboratory?” marvelled the monk.

“Yes, at our headquarters in Rocky Beach. I have a request to ask from you. May we take the painting there and have a close examination? I don’t know exactly what will come out of it, but I’m sure there’s a secret in this painting!”

“As long as there’s no harm done.”

“We’ll be careful, I promise.”

“All right.” Brother Raphael nodded.

“Then we’ll leave now.”

“But you’ll come back as soon as you find something, won’t you? It doesn’t have to be in the middle of the night. But I’m dying to know what’s going on with the painting! My brothers will be thrilled!”

“We will,” Jupiter assured him.

Brother Raphael accompanied them outside and led them through the now dark garden to the gate. “Good night,” he said.

Jupiter laughed. “It’ll only be good if we find out something back in the lab. Sleep is out of the question for a while.”

“I will include you in my prayer,” Brother Raphael promised.

“It can never hurt,” Pete said.

They said goodbye, got into Pete’s car and drove back towards Rocky Beach.

“A nice man,” Pete thought. “I didn’t know monks were interested in mystery stories. Say, who are Father Brown and William of Bakersville?”

“Baskerville,” corrected Jupiter. “They are characters in a novel—clergymen who solved murders. As for murders, I hope Brother Raphael will not join this society.”

“I certainly hope so,” Bob added.

Very soon, they returned to the salvage yard. They entered Headquarters, went to their small laboratory, cleared the table and put the painting on it. Then Jupiter switched on the spotlight and aimed it at the painting.

“The operation can begin.” Suddenly he was startled.

“What is it, Juve?” Pete asked. “Did you forget your scalpel?”

The First Investigator stared at the painting speechlessly.

“Juve? Are you not feeling well?” Bob asked.

He ran from the lab to the desk.

“Juve!” cried Bob. “What’s the matter with you?”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Here he goes again.”

“What?” Bob asked.

“The Jupiter Jones syndrome. This I-have-a-brainstorm-but-will-not-reveal-it-yet-to-drive-you-crazy. And he does it every time. He drives me crazy. Juve!” yelled Pete.

The First Investigator returned excitedly. In his hand he held the photo of the storehouse.

“We have to go back!”

“Sorry? Back to the monastery?” Pete asked.

“Yes!” Jupiter exclaimed.

“But what the hell... I mean, hell. I mean...” Pete shouted, annoyed. “Uh... What can one say about a monastery?”

“Not ‘devil’, for sure...” Bob said.

“Are there any curses that don’t embarrass... uh... blasphemous... are blasphemous?”

“Hmm, maybe ‘crap’?” Bob suggested.

“Stop this nonsense!” Jupiter interrupted them gruffly. “Did you not hear what I said? We have to go back!”

“Only when you tell us what you have discovered in the depths of your brain twists,” Pete insisted.

“Nothing. It was right in front of us the whole time. We just never saw it.”

“Saw what, Juve?” Bob asked.

“The answer to the puzzle! The hiding place of the paintings!”

“And where, pray tell, is it?” Pete asked.

But Jupiter had already turned around and reached for his backpack. Hurriedly he packed a few things together.

“You see, Bob,” Pete moaned. “That’s what I mean.”

Bob watched Jupiter insert a few metres of rope. “A rope, Juve? Why do we need a rope?”

“You’ll see. Hurry up! And take the painting with you! And don’t forget your flashlights!”

It was no use. Jupiter would not tell them what he had discovered until he decided to do so. Bob and Pete got their flashlights, Pete put the painting into his car and he drove them back to the mission.

They made it to Glenview Valley in a good twenty minutes. But when they reached the monastery walls, there was no light behind any of the windows.

“They’re all asleep again,” Pete noted. “Unbelievable. Don’t they watch TV?”

“Monks don’t have televisions, Pete,” Bob said.

“Why not?”

“Because they’re monks.”

The Three Investigators climbed over the wall and sneaked across the monastery grounds. This time the moon was shining and bathed the garden in ghostly silvery light. Not a breath of wind blew and the trees and bushes looked as if they had been frozen to stone. Finally, Jupiter stopped and looked over to the storehouse.

“This is where Bregovic must have taken the photo.” He took the photo out of his pocket and compared it with they were seeing. “Yes. This is where he was standing.”

“So?” Pete asked. “What does that tell us now?”

“Let me see the painting, Pete,” Jupiter said.

The Second Investigator held the painting up. The scene in the painting was in sunshine, but now it was night. But apart from the lighting conditions, everything matched—except for one small detail.

“Hey! He forgot the well at the back of the storehouse,” Bob cried.

“Exactly, Bob,” Jupiter said. “Compare the painting with the photo! Bregovic thought of everything. The number of wooden planks that make up the door is right. He painted every single blue tile exactly as in the photo. The number of orange trees are the same. Sure, on site here, the leaves and branches would have changed over eight years, but that’s not the point. We have to compare the painting with the photo.”

“You’re right, Juve,” Pete said. “Everything is painted exactly as in the photo. He just omitted the well.”

“Remember, Pete. Omission is the key here, as a final clue for whoever is trying to solve the mystery,” Jupiter added. “It’s just like in Huguenay’s letter. We had to compare the titles of the paintings in his letter with the real names, for example, ‘Burglar’ with ‘Beggar’. The difference between the two led us to the solution. Now we are again faced with the same situation—there is no well in the painting. But photo, which represents what is on site, tells us otherwise. Therefore, the well is the solution.”

“The paintings are in the well?” cried Pete. “Brilliant, Juve!”

“Shh!” hissed Bob. “Not so loud, Pete!”

But the Second Investigator didn’t hear him at all anymore. On the double, he ran to the well and took a look inside. Jupiter and Bob followed him. The well was built of stone and covered with a roof. There was a wooden bucket by the side.

“And?” Jupiter asked. “Is there anything in it?”

“I can’t see a thing,” Pete said. “Hand me the flashlight, Bob.”

Bob rummaged around in his backpack—and paused. “Did you hear something?” he whispered.

They all froze and listened. At first, they heard nothing. But then—steps! Slow, careful steps. They came closer. Then a shadow appeared between the orange trees.

In a flash, the three detectives ducked behind the well. Had the figure seen them?

The shadow came closer and closer. He walked towards the storehouse and stopped. Then he circled it—and went straight towards the well!

15. Going Down

Bob was prepared to jump. If that was Baldy, there was only one way—they had to overpower him before he saw them. That was their only chance. The guy was armed. If he spotted them...

The man got closer and closer...

Suddenly Jupiter stood up and stepped out of the cover of the well. "Brother Raphael!"

The monk made a little cry and jumped back half a metre. "Jupiter!"

"What are you doing here?" Jupiter asked.

Brother Raphael grabbed his chest panting. It took a moment for him to calm down. "My goodness, you scared me! What am I doing here? I live here! I was thinking a lot about your visit today and couldn't sleep. So I went out into the garden like I sometimes do. What in the name of all the saints are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"In the name of all the saints!" cried Pete enthusiastically. "It's not exactly a curse, but you can say it instead of 'hell' and 'devil' and it's not blasphemous!"

"Excuse me?" the monk asked.

"Ignore him, Brother Raphael," advised Jupiter and briefed the monk about their latest findings and the reason for their visit.

"The well," said the monk finally, stunned. "That would really be possible! When the mission station was built over two hundred years ago, it was for water, but it has been dried out for at least a hundred years. The only reason the mission left it standing is because it looks beautiful, and so, kept it as a decorative well."

Jupiter bent over and held the flashlight down. "As far as I can see, the well is not very deep. Maybe slightly over four metres. There's a bit of foliage down there, that's all."

"When it dried up, it was probably filled up," Brother Raphael said. "It is possible that there was some sort of construction done to it as well."

"A dry well is really a good hiding place for delicate paintings," said Jupiter. "They are protected and yet no one would think of looking for them here."

Jupiter paused for a while and then said resolutely: "We have to get down there."

"You... you want to... go down there?" asked the monk. "Now?"

"Of course," Jupe answered. "If we want to find the paintings, I don't think we have a choice."

Brother Raphael paused, looked from one to the other. "Okay, how are you going to proceed?"

"So, due to the diameter of the well, I suggest that two of us go down to inspect first," Jupiter said. "How about Pete and Bob?"

"I guess so," Bob remarked. "You would take up too much space."

Jupiter ignored that remark and immediately began to fasten the rope he had brought with him to a bar at the roof of the well.

Pete swung his leg over the well wall, tried to find a firm grip on the rope and finally let himself down slowly. Absolute blackness welcomed him, with only the beam of Bob's flashlight dancing around him. It was cold down here. And it smelled musty. Then Pete reached the bottom. His feet touched rustling leaves.

“Throw me your flashlight, Bob!” Pete cleverly caught the flashlight and as he looked around, Bob climbed down. When the two of them were at the bottom of the well, they lit up the floor and the walls, and started inspecting.

“Pretty disgusting down here,” Pete found and turned up his nose as woodlice and other critters fled from the circle of light from his flashlight into the cracks between the stones. “Now where are the paintings?”

“They must be hidden in some compartment in the wall,” said Bob. “Come on, examine every single stone!”

They set to work. It was more exhausting than they had thought. For when all the stones were searched at eye level, the two of them crouched down and got in each other’s way from time to time.

“There’s something here!” Bob suddenly shouted. “One of the stones in the wall is loose!”

Everyone turned to Bob at the same time. “Hey, Pete, get your knee out of my back!”

“Can you pull out the stone, Bob?” Pete asked.

Bob didn’t succeed at first go, but with the help of his pocket knife he finally managed to free the stone from the moss and to move it carefully. It came out of the wall about four centimetres, then it got stuck.

“What’s wrong?” Pete said,

“It’s stuck. It doesn’t seem to come out fully,” Bob said.

“Let me try it.” Pete pushed Bob aside and tried it himself. But even he was not successful. “It’s kind of stuck.”

“I told you so,” Bob replied annoyingly.

Pete scraped even more moss and earth out of the cracks, but the stone could not be pulled out any further. “That was it,” he said. “We won’t get anywhere with this stone. Let’s search the rest!”

The two of them continued to examine stone by stone. Nothing happened.

After ten minutes, Pete rose to his knees, groaning and stretching his aching back. “This is not going to work anymore, Bob. Either what we’re looking for doesn’t exist anymore or we’ve been barking up the wrong tree from the beginning.” He propped himself up against the wall with one hand, right where the loose stone was.

It suddenly gave way and slid into the wall. Something clicked into place.

“Bob! We are idiots! The stone was not meant to be pulled out, but pushed in! We—”

That was as far as Pete got. Suddenly there was a loud rumbling, stone scraped over stone—and the bottom of the well gave way! Pete and Bob raced down screaming like in an out-of-control lift.

WHAM!

“What happened!” Jupiter shouted from the top of the well.

“Ouch!” cried Pete as the free fall stopped abruptly.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Bob asked and picked up his flashlight.

Pete looked down on himself. “Nope. But I thought I did.”

“Hey, Juve!” cried Bob, who was also shaking his knees. “Pete must have triggered a mechanism that caused the entire bottom of the well to plummet. But we didn’t fall far fortunately—three metres at most—else we could have been badly hurt.”

“Then there is some sort of a compartment down there!” Juve exclaimed.

“Well, I’ve had enough,” Pete said. He looked up. The well opening seemed to be far above them. And halfway up, the rope they had climbed down was dangling.

“Bummer!” cried the Second Investigator. “The rope! It’s hanging too high! Is it long enough to be lowered down? Else, how are we going to get out now?”

“Through this door, for example,” Bob said.

“Excuse me?” Pete asked and turned to Bob.

In the darkness, Pete had not seen it at all. Bob stepped aside and shone this flashlight at a small wooden door had appeared in a depression in the wall of the well. Pete stared in amazement.

“Hey Jupe!” Bob exclaimed. “We found it! There’s a door here!”

“Wow! This is really exciting,” said Brother Raphael. “Could it possibly be... Could the door be opened?”

“We’re really on to something now!” Jupe shouted back. “Can you open the door?”

There was no lock or door handle on the door. Bob pushed it. It did not move. Then both of them pushed together. It creaked, and then the door swung squeakily inwards, revealing a view into a gloomy hole. A gush of stale, cold air struck them.

“Jupe!” Bob cried. “Yes! We got it opened! There is a tunnel of some sort.”

“Hey! Wait for me!” Jupe shouted back. “I’m coming down!”

“I’m coming with you,” Brother Raphael decided.

“Are you sure?” Jupe asked, surprised. “It could be—”

“Yes,” he said. “I am sure. I’ve dreamt of something like this since I was a child! And if it had happened to me then, I might never have become a monk, but a treasure hunter!”

Jupiter smiled. “All right, I’ll lower more rope down first!”

Luckily, the rope he brought was long enough. Jupiter untied it at the bar and lowered another three metres of it down, and then tied it again at the bar. Then Jupiter went down.

When he reached the bottom, Bob and Pete was already inside the tunnel waiting. Brother Raphael then came down. Finally, all four of them were at the entrance and tried to get a glimpse into the tunnel.

Jupiter shone his flashlight into the tunnel. “A passageway. Partly bricked in, partly just dug through the ground.”

“Can you see how far it goes?” Pete asked.

“No. Definitely far,” Jupiter said. “Somewhere back there the light is getting lost. But it shouldn’t be a problem to find out. Come on, fellas!”

“Shouldn’t someone better stay outside? In case something happens?” Pete suggested. He was uncomfortable with that tunnel. “Who knows what is waiting for us in there?”

“If you want to, then you can stay here,” Jupiter calmly replied. “You’ll probably miss the best part, but whatever you say.”

“Anyone else wants to stay out?” No one answered.

Pete weighed the alternatives. Together with the others in these dark, creepy tunnels—or stay alone here in the well shaft.

“I’m coming with you,” he said quickly.

“Let’s do it!” Jupiter retracted his head and entered the dark passageway. Not the slightest bit of moonlight fell into the tunnel. Only the cold light of his flashlight provided the illumination.

Damp soil, from which white and brown plant roots protruded, surrounded Jupiter. Here and there the walls were supported by pieces of wall, but Jupiter doubted that they would withstand a great deal of stress.

At once, he felt anxious. The tunnel gave the impression that it would collapse at any moment. The ceiling was so low that Jupiter kept hitting his head and earth and small stones were trickling down on him. The First Investigator took a step forward. The sooner he was

out of this tunnel, the better. For a while the passage led straight ahead, then he made a bend to the left.

"It leads to the church," Brother Raphael remarked. His voice sounded strangely dull and soft down here. The earthen walls muffled every sound. "It's an escape tunnel!"

"An escape tunnel?" Bob asked. "Who wanted to escape? And why?"

"I don't know," Brother Raphael said. "Probably nobody ever used it. But in Europe, tunnels underneath monasteries are almost a tradition. When the Spanish settled California and built the mission stations, they may have brought this tradition with them from their homeland, for protection from possible enemies. There were always some in our Order who suspected a tunnel under the church. But no one ever found it."

"That's the end," whispered Jupiter. "Another wooden door. Hopefully it'll go up again behind it!"

The door was as weathered as the first one that led into the passageway. It hung loose and crooked on its hinges.

"Now I'm curious," said Jupiter and pushed it open. Behind it was a cellar. One after the other they stepped out of the passageway and let the lights of the flashlights wander around. The room measured about eight by eight metres and was about three metres high. Unlike the tunnel, the walls were all stone—the same large, dark stone blocks that were used to build the church. On each side was an empty torch holder. Above them, the ceiling arched like a dome that ended in a square stone slab. The floor was also covered with dark slabs.

Some wooden crates stood in a corner.

The Three Investigators and brother Raphael walked through the cellar in awe. Their every step echoed off the cold walls.

"We are indeed under the church," whispered the monk.

"That the square portion of the ceiling should be the underside of the altar," said Pete, thinking of the lie Jupiter had told the bald man the night before.

"No, I think it's the baptismal font," Brother Raphael said. "A secret passage under San Miguel! Who'd have thought it?"

"In the crates over there, there were probably once stored supplies," Jupiter said. "For the monks who had to hide for a long time and escape was out of the question. I wonder what's in them now."

"Man, the paintings!" cried Pete. "I almost forgot about them!"

They gathered around the wooden crates. They looked old and deteriorated. None of them had a lock.

"Let's see then," said Jupiter and opened the first one.

"Empty," Pete noted. "Well, there's a few left."

The second and third crates were also empty and The Three Investigators were getting nervous. But when Jupiter opened the fourth wooden chest, six bundles were in it. Someone had wrapped large, flat objects in light-coloured linen.

No one dared to breathe as Jupiter took out one of the bundles, laid it carefully on the floor and slowly freed it from the fabric layer by layer. Then he removed the last piece.

16. At the Last Second

In a noble wooden frame, was a painting with dogs.

“The paintings!” cried Pete. “It’s really the paintings! *Farmer with Dogs*! Quick, Jupe, unpack the others too.”

Jupiter didn’t need to be told twice. He laid one bundle after the other on the floor and each one of them unwrapped a bundle. *Drummer Boy*, *The Dark Winter*, and the rest were all there.

“We did it!” Bob now shouted enthusiastically.

“Yes,” said Jupiter and grinned broadly and contentedly. “We have.”

“Congratulations, Jupiter!” said Brother Raphael and kept patting him on the shoulder. In the fickle glow of the flashlights, the First Investigator was not quite sure, but it seemed as if the monk was all red in the face from excitement.

“Man, madness!” Pete said reverently. “We’re looking at paintings worth millions of dollars.”

“And that’s why we’d better pack them up again quickly,” Jupiter decided. “Before anything else happens to them.” Gently they wrapped the paintings back into the cloths.

“Well,” Jupiter said. “Brother Raphael, it seems that someone has discovered the secret passage before us.”

“Namely Hugenay,” Pete added. Then he stopped. “Wait a minute. But I guess Hugenay was never here? Only this Bregovic. Right?” Puzzled, he looked from Jupiter to Bob and back again to Jupiter.

“Who hid the paintings here? Hugenay? But it was Bregovic who painted the picture of the storehouse with the missing well.” The Second Investigator scratched his head. “I don’t understand it.”

“Yes, puzzling, isn’t it?” said Jupiter. “I’ve been racking my brain since we learned that a Mr Samuel Bregovic sought refuge in San Miguel eight years ago and painted here. And we now know that he does not look like Hugenay.”

“And what conclusion have you arrived at, Jupe?” Bob wanted to know. Everyone looked at the First Investigator with anticipation.

“Well,” Jupe started slowly. “I wasn’t sure if we could really find the paintings here. It could have been that the well and the secret passageway were just another stage of the puzzle. But now that this has been cleared up and we’ve found the paintings, there’s really no doubt anymore.”

“No doubt about what?” Pete drilled. “Come on, Jupe, don’t put on this show again, just tell us what you brilliantly deduced!”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “All this time we thought we were chasing Victor Hugenay’s legacy. But we didn’t. All these puzzles were not invented for us by him—but by Samuel Bregovic.”

“Excuse me?” Bob and Pete asked at the same time.

“But we don’t even know this Bregovic!” Bob remarked.

“You’ll have to explain that, Jupiter,” Brother Raphael said.

“It’s so easy,” a cold, buzzing voice suddenly said.

The Three Investigators and Brother Raphael whirled around. At the door stood the man with the bald head! In one hand he held a flashlight. In the other—a gun.

“What are you doing here?” cried Pete.

“Same as you, I guess. I’m gonna get what’s mine.” Slowly he stepped into the vault, driving the four of them into a corner. “Very clever of you, fatso, luring me away from Glenview Valley to Santa Barbara... Very, very tough. I should never have believed you. But you were too slow, my dear friends. I’m back already. And I want those paintings.”

“Who are you?” asked Jupiter.

“You still don’t know?” The bald man smiled mockingly. “Then I guess I overestimated you. Strange, strange. You were clever enough to decipher Bregovic’s puzzle, but you have no idea who he is or who I am!”

“Tell us,” Jupiter probed. He tried to make his voice sound calm, while his brain was working at full speed. If the bald man got the paintings now, it meant that he had no intention of letting them go. They had to overpower him somehow! But how?

“All right. My name is Baldwin. By profession, I am... well, how shall I say... art thief—just like Victor Hugenay. I used to work with him. Until that dog sold me out and did his own thing. Hugenay is a cunning fox. He is not to be trusted!”

“We already know that,” Jupiter quipped. “Please continue.”

“There was a third party in the group—Bregovic, the old crook. He was almost as cunning as Hugenay. But Hugenay betrayed him too, and so the three of us finally went our own ways. Bregovic, however, did particularly well. He held back for years and watched what Hugenay did. When he finally went on a raid of his own, he imitated Hugenay’s style, so that everyone believed that the thefts were Hugenay’s doing. That’s how he wanted to get back at him.”

“So Hugenay didn’t steal these six paintings,” Bob said. “It was Bregovic.”

“Exactly. Hugenay was powerless,” Baldwin continued. “He kept trying to stop Bregovic from getting in his way, but he never succeeded. Well, then fate came to his aid. Bregovic got sick and died. He wrote those puzzles as the last little meanness and sent it to Hugenay and me, probably in the hope that we would scratch each other’s eyes out looking for the paintings.”

“But... but I think the puzzles are from Hugenay,” Pete said, confused. “He sent it to us after his death.”

“That’s it, Pete,” said Jupiter, who was just coming to one realization after another.

“With the small but significant difference that Victor Hugenay is not dead.”

“What?” Bob and Pete cried together.

Jupiter’s face darkened. “He fooled us—once again. It was all a lie from the beginning. Hugenay is alive!”

Jupiter turned to Baldwin. “He faked his death just to disappear, didn’t he?”

Baldwin nodded. “He’s been getting a little careless lately. He thought he was infallible, I guess. The police were hot on his trail. So he faked his death and went into hiding. I saw right through that. Hugenay and mountaineering, my ass! But the police fell for it.”

“The trouble was that he could no longer search for Bregovic’s legacy,” continued Jupiter. “It would probably have been too dangerous to come here to America now that he had just been declared dead.

“But time was pressing, after all he knew that you had received the same clues from Bregovic as he had and would probably find the paintings sooner or later. Hugenay was therefore looking for a way to get ahead of you without putting himself in danger of being discovered. And that’s where he came—”

“—To us!” cried Bob. “My goodness, you’re right, Jupe! It all makes sense! Hugenay probably knew that the paintings was somewhere in California. And, of course, he immediately thought of us! After all, we’re pretty much the smartest thing California has to offer!”

“Just for this cunning game, we were not smart enough,” Pete added gloomily. “Hugenay sent us a letter and continued to pretend he was dead. And Bregovic’s puzzles, which was meant for him, he passed off as his own, so that we would solve it for him.”

Baldwin laughed softly and began walking up and down the vault, but without taking his eyes off The Three Investigators and Brother Raphael.

“I had no idea he was up to something like this, but it suited him,” Baldwin continued. “When I first met the three of you in the museum in front of the painting with the dove egg and overheard you talking about Hugenay, I couldn’t believe my eyes and ears. I knew you were after the same thing as me. I just didn’t know how you had found out about Bregovic’s puzzle in the first place. After my attempt to find the next clue in the painting in the museum failed, I followed you. I was missing the decisive clue where to look further. For a few days, I watched you. Then you drove to San Miguel and I realized that this could only have something to do with Bregovic’s puzzles.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “How did you actually escape from the museum back then? The police had all the exits covered. No one got past their checkpoints!”

“Yes,” contradicted Baldwin. “Everyone went out their one checkpoint—anyone not bald and not wearing a light-coloured suit. I had simply put on a wig and taken off the suit jacket and worn it under my arm. Simple but effective.” Baldwin stopped again. “I guess that answers all your questions, doesn’t it? Now I’ll just take the paintings and go.”

“And... what happens to us?”

Baldwin smiled coldly and raised his gun.

“No!” cried Brother Raphael and stood protectively before the boys. “These three are just boys! You can’t do this!”

“You’re welcome to say another prayer if you like.”

Suddenly a shadow appeared behind Baldwin through the tunnel into the vault. Jupiter flinched.

It was Brittany! He forced himself not to look at her, but it was already too late.

Baldwin had noticed his gaze. “Sheesh!” he said. “How pathetic. Do you really think I’m gonna look around so you can pounce on me right this second? I won’t do you that favour.”

Brother Raphael put his hands together, lowered his head and muttered something.

“Finished, Brother?” Baldwin said.

“Yes. I prayed for you,” Brother Raphael said. “May the Almighty have mercy on your poor soul and not let you die when this girl who is standing behind you strikes you with a shovel.”

Baldwin laughed cold. “Well, well, well. I wouldn’t have thought a clergyman had such a sense of—”

Brittany struck. The shovel smashed Baldwin at the back of his head. He went down instantly and dropped his gun.

“Brittany!” Jupiter rushed forward, jumped over Baldwin, who was lying motionless on the floor, and hugged the girl.

“Brittany?” Bob and Pete looked at each other with wide eyes. Then Brother Raphael rushed in and took Baldwin’s gun.

“We have to tie him up somehow before he comes to!” Bob said.

"I'll take care of that," Brother Raphael offered himself and tore long strips of cloth from his robe. Then he set to work. "I've always wanted to do that!"

"How did you get here?" cried Jupiter and was close to shaking Brittany to answer.

"What... what's going on here anyway?" asked the girl perplexed.

"What's going on? I'm asking you!" Jupe cried.

"Well, you didn't come for our date! We were supposed to celebrate tonight."

"Our date... I forgot all about it!"

"Exactly. And I thought that was weird. So I figured, maybe you guys haven't found the paintings yet. And that something might have happened. And after I couldn't find you at Headquarters, I drove down here. You had told me where you thought the paintings were hidden.

"Then I saw this bald guy who was climbing into the well, thought to myself, this must be the bad guy you told me about. So I took a shovel out of the garden shed and climbed after him. Just in time, it seems."

"That was great!" cried Jupiter and hugged Brittany a second time. Then he gave her a kiss.

"Uhhh..." Pete spoke up. "Everything's great here. I mean, the treasure is safe, the villain is tied up, the hero and heroine kiss... but would somebody please tell me what this is all about?"

17. The Whole Story

It took Jupiter a while to enlighten his friends. In the glow of the flashlights, he told them everything, from the day he first met Brittany until that night.

Only the thing he didn't mention was her disease and his plan. He had no idea how to approach the subject. So he put it off as long as he could.

When he was finally finished, Pete sulked. He felt betrayed. Not even Bob, who had known about Brittany, had told him. "All right, Jupe. So you have a new girlfriend, who you can quickly let in on all the investigations without telling us," he finally blurted out.

"Well, listen! Brittany saved us!" Jupiter argued.

"Yes. And I'm grateful to her for that, too," Pete explained. "But I'm not mad at Brittany. I'm mad at you. I thought we were friends."

Jupiter started to reply, but then he let it be. This was definitely the wrong place and the wrong time for a fundamental discussion with Pete.

The Second Investigator obviously felt the same way, because he said: "Now can we get out of here and call the police?"

"I will do that," said Brother Raphael and headed for the exit.

"Wait!" cried Jupiter. Brother Raphael stopped and looked at him questioningly. The First Investigator swallowed. This was the moment of truth. "No police," he said. "We... we won't call the police."

"Excuse me?" Brother Raphael asked. "What are you saying?"

"Yes, Jupe, what is this?" Pete asked. "Have you completely lost your mind? Are you going to let Baldwin rot down here or let him go?" He took one look at the still motionless and tied up bald man lying there. "I admit he's dangerous, and that's exactly why he should go to jail."

"Fine," said Jupiter. "Because of Baldwin, we will call the police. But first I have to tell you something. It's about the... about the paintings."

Bob turned around and shone at the wrapped paintings. "The paintings? What about the paintings?"

"When the police come, they'll want to take them and return them to their rightful owners," Jupe began.

"Yes," Pete said confusedly. "Sure. So?"

Brittany stared at Jupiter in disbelief. "You didn't tell them?"

Jupiter shook his head slowly. What a fine mess he had got into.

"What haven't you told us?" Pete asked, lurking.

"But you said your friends were on our side!" Brittany exclaimed.

"Jupiter Jones!" Pete angrily sparkled at the First Investigator. "What haven't you told us?"

"All right," said Jupiter and sighed. He exchanged a long look with Brittany. She took his hand.

And then Jupiter told another story that silenced Bob, Pete and brother Raphael. He told about Brittany's illness, about her despair, about the possibility of surgery, about the lack of money—and finally about his idea not to hand over the paintings to the police, but to

exchange them for money to pay for the surgery—even at that moment, he had no idea how to sell the paintings.

“I know I should have told you all this before,” said Jupiter, “but somehow... somehow... everything happened so quickly, we were so busy solving the mystery—there was simply no time!

“And now we have a problem. Of course I can’t force you to agree to the plan and break the law. I can only hope that you... think things over.”

For a long time nobody said a word. Bob looked down at the ground. Brother Raphael looked up at the ceiling of the vault, but he seemed to see through it, straight to the sky.

After all, it was Pete who was the first to speak again: “This is all a bit much for one night, and I’m not sure if I’ve even understood what’s going on here today, but one thing I do know—I’m on your side.”

Jupiter looked up in surprise. He had not expected this. “You... you mean...”

“That, of course, I want to help Brittany as much as you do. What do you think of me, Juve? And I can’t think of any other solution right now. These paintings... Pfff, whatever. They’re just paintings, right? Besides, we’ve returned many stolen paintings in our detective days. For once, we get to keep some of them. I think so. But I can’t speak for everyone, of course.” He looked over at Bob.

Bob wrestled with himself. “I’m not quite as calm about this as Pete is. We’re breaking the law if we don’t return the paintings. And I’m not talking about parking tickets here. We’re risking a lot. On the other hand, I’m not sure it can weigh more heavily than the fate of one person. I, uh... I just don’t know!” Seeking help, he turned to Jupiter, to Pete—and finally to Brother Raphael.

The monk had not yet said anything about Jupiter’s story. Now he stepped up to Brittany and took her hands. “The Almighty has placed a great test on you, child. A very hard one. I am the last one to judge your—your—decision. I only ask you if you have given it careful thought.”

Brittany nodded. “I had some concerns at first, big ones. And frankly, I still have it. But my fear is even greater. My fear...” Suddenly, tears filled her eyes. It was a while before she could speak.

“The idea that in a few months I won’t be able to see... to be blind for the rest of my life, it drives me crazy. I’m panicking! I’m, uh... I can’t do this! I can’t spend my life in the dark! A world without light is... It’s like being trapped in this vault for the rest of my life! It’s like...” Helplessly, she struggled for words.

She wiped the tears from her face, then grabbed Jupiter’s hand again and squeezed it so tightly that the First Investigator was afraid she would break his hand.

“I don’t want to go blind,” it finally broke out of her with a sob. “Perhaps you are right, Brother Raphael, perhaps this disease is a test from the Almighty. But if that means I should accept my fate and do nothing about it, then... then I won’t pass that test. Then again... perhaps the test is also for me to take my life into my own hands and not give in to my fate without a fight. And in that case, I am prepared to do whatever it takes to escape that fate.”

Brittany looked the monk firmly in the eye as if she expected an answer from him.

“I cannot tell you what is right and what is wrong,” Brother Raphael said. “Only the Almighty knows that. There’s no easy way and no easy answer. I just want you to be one hundred percent sure that the path you want to take is truly yours.”

Brittany nodded. “I understand.”

“Now it’s up to Bob,” said Jupiter and looked at his friend expectantly, almost imploringly. “We have to agree, Bob. No one is forced to do anything. If you’re against it,

then... we won't do it."

Bob sighed. He was not at all sure whether he was making the right decision. But he said, "We're gonna do it."

For a very long moment, there was silence. No one was happy or relieved. This was only the first step—probably the easiest of all. What was ahead of them would be more difficult.

Suddenly they heard someone clapped. The clapping came from the tunnel. Someone came out of the passage into the vault. "Bravo! Let's hear it! That was really an excellent performance! A masterpiece, Brittany! You have real talent! You've won over everyone, even the moral Bob Andrews!"

"Mr Graham!" cried the three detectives as if from one mouth.

"Who is this again?" Brother Raphael asked in surprise. "Will this ever end? Slowly there's no more room down here."

"What are you doing here?" Jupiter was stunned.

"I'm saving you from the biggest mistake in the history of your detective career," replied the reporter, pointing to Brittany. "She's a fraud! And if I've interpreted your conversation correctly, she's been playing you all for fools, especially you, Jupiter!"

"You're lying!" Jupiter hissed angrily.

"Really? You didn't even let me finish. Then how do you know I'm lying?"

"I can see it from the tip of your nose," Jupiter said. "You're still angry because we did not give you the interview. Since then, you never missed an opportunity to get back at us, and your methods are becoming more and more absurd! First the slander at the museum and now this! You know something, Mr Graham? You're a sick man!"

Graham smiled superiorly. "In that case, will you give this sick man a chance to speak freely for five minutes?"

"I don't know what's the point in doing so," Jupiter said.

"To uncover the truth. I thought that's what you detectives are always interested in!"

"Let him talk, Jupe," Bob said. "I'd sure like to hear what he's spun up."

Jupiter hesitated for a moment, then he nodded defiantly. "Fine."

"Very kind." Graham built himself up pompously in front of the three detectives, Brittany, Brother Raphael and the bound and still unconscious Baldwin and began to tell: "You're right about one thing, Jupiter. It all started with that damn interview.

"Pete almost blabbed when we talked about Hugenay, and I became very attentive. When you sent me away that afternoon, I stayed nearby and watched your headquarters. At some point the door stood open for quite a while and I sneaked in and found the letter from Hugenay."

"Excuse me?" Jupiter exploded. "You broke into our headquarters?"

"Like I said, the door was open. And you'll thank me for this, Jupiter, believe me. So I read the letter. Or rather, I skimmed over it because I was afraid of being discovered. Unfortunately, one page was missing."

"I took it to the library," Bob recalled.

"Everything I knew about you and Hugenay now came together with that letter," Graham continued. "And from these facts, the only logical conclusion I could draw was that you are Hugenay's accomplices. How else could it be that you let him escape three times in the past!

"And then this legacy, in which he asks you to find his stolen paintings. I knew you'd been working with him for years, cleverly disguised as detectives. And I wanted to make it big with this exposé."

"Hence the theatre in the museum!" said Jupiter and laughed scornfully. "I have never heard anything more absurd, Mr Graham."

“By now I know that I have drawn the wrong conclusions,” the reporter confessed.

“If you are snooping around in other people’s letters, you should read them more carefully in the future,” said Pete venomously. “If you had, you’d have realized we never had anything to do with Hugenay.”

“By now I’m glad I was so naïve,” Graham said. “That’s how I kept track of you. After all, I wanted to find proof for my story. So I put a tail on you and followed you into the museum. When the alarm went off and I saw you with the painting torn down, it was clear to me. Not only were you in cahoots with Hugenay, but you are art thieves just like him!”

Jupiter shook his head in laughter. “As I said before, Mr Graham, this is absurd! You are a sick man. Is there anything more to come? Otherwise I would be grateful if you could leave us alone and stay away from us once and for all!”

Graham grinned brazenly. “There’s something else coming, Jupiter Jones, there’s something else coming. I stayed on your heels. I noticed that you were seeing a lot of this young lady. So I turned my attention to her too. That’s why I’m here. I followed her tonight. And I just listened to everything from the tunnel, the whole story. I don’t know exactly what it is about these paintings and this guy, but I haven’t figured out the secret yet.

“But I know one thing for sure—Brittany is a fraud! She lied to you through her teeth! All this nonsense about her illness and the threat of blindness—really well played! But a complete lie! She wants the paintings, that’s all.”

“That’s not true,” cried Brittany. “I think what you’re saying is outrageous! How dare you spy on me!”

“Get out of here, Graham,” Jupiter said angrily. “I can’t bear your slander any longer.”

“Give me another minute, Jupiter!” Graham said quickly. “Because I’ve saved the best for last. Two days ago, I was spying on Brittany and overheard a phone call she was making on the street. And guess who she was talking to.”

“I’m not interested in that at all, Mr Graham! Brittany is—”

“With Victor Hugenay.”

Suddenly silence spread. Only Brittany laughed out loud. A little too loud.

“She told him that everything was going according to plan and that she already got you not to hand over the paintings to the police. What do you say, Jupiter?”

“That man is talking crazy, Jupiter!” Brittany cried. “You don’t believe him, do you?”

Jupiter said nothing more. He suddenly became dizzy. “You’re lying,” he said to Graham soundlessly.

“No, I’m not. And I can even prove it,” Graham said. “Brittany spoke to Hugenay again, and only half an hour ago, when she was on her way here. She has her mobile phone with him. If you press redial, you’ll have him on the line.”

Pete, Bob, Brother Raphael—they all held their breath and looked alternately from Jupiter to Brittany and back again.

Desperation was written on Brittany’s face. Whatever was going on in Jupiter’s mind, no one was able to say.

“That’s a load of crap,” Brittany replied. “I don’t even have my mobile phone with me!”

It happened in a flash. Graham jumped forward, tore open Brittany’s denim jacket and reached into the inside pocket. Half a second later, he triumphantly held the mobile phone in his hand.

Brittany screamed and tried to take it away from him, but he was faster.

“I had it with me, then!” shouted Brittany. “But that doesn’t mean anything! Jupiter!”

“Here you are, Jupiter! If you want the truth, check it out yourself!” Graham threw the mobile phone to Jupiter.

The First Investigator caught it and stared at it blankly.

No one said a word.

Pete stared at the phone.

Bob stared at the phone.

Brother Raphael stared at the phone.

Wilbur Graham smiled diabolically and waited.

Brittany whimpered softly, but said nothing.

Jupiter still did not move. Then, he pressed the redial button and very slowly, he raised it to his ear. And he waited. Somewhere in the world, the phone rang.

Once. Twice. Three times.

Jupiter fervently hoped that no one would answer. He didn't want to know who was on the other end. He didn't want to hear it.

Four times.

He'd hang up. One more ring and he'd hang up.

Five times. Somebody answered the call.

18. Blind

“Hugenay.”

Jupiter froze.

“Hello? Hello, who is this?”

The First Investigator recognized the voice with a French accent. There was no doubt. It was Victor Hugenay.

“Brittany? Is that you?”

Jupiter hung up. Slowly, very slowly, he turned his gaze from the void he had stared into to Brittany. She was as white as a sheet. She stumbled a step back. Then she dashed into the tunnel and ran away.

Mr Graham was quick. He spun around, chasing Brittany. But Jupiter was even quicker. He ran to the entrance to the tunnel and blocked Graham.

“Step aside!” Graham raved. “She’s getting away!”

“No,” said the First Investigator. “Let her go...”

“Jupe!” cried Pete in horror. “Was that really Hugenay on the phone? Jupe! Say something! Jupe!”

But Jupe did not answer. He remained silent for a very, very long time.

In the following days, Jupiter avoided talking to his friends. The missing paintings were handed over to the police. Mr Baldwin, the art thief, went to prison. And Brother Raphael was a celebrated star in the media for many days, where he was compared with Father Brown and William of Baskerville. Then calm returned to Mission San Miguel.

Mr Graham wrote an article for the *Los Angeles Tribune* in which he portrayed The Three Investigators as naïve idiots who had not recognized the simplest connections and had fallen for a fraud who worked for Victor Hugenay. He deliberately ignored the fact that it had been the three detectives who had found the hiding place of the paintings.

Pete and Bob were terribly upset about this. They spoke of damage to their reputation and considered whether they should sue Graham. But finally Bob’s father, who worked at a rival newspaper, was able to convince them otherwise by pointing out that the waves would have calmed down within a week. And who would care about yesterday’s news? Only then, they changed their minds.

But Jupiter Jones was not interested in all of this. He wanted nothing to do with all the hustle and bustle surrounding the six paintings believed to have been lost and the realization that Victor Hugenay was not dead after all. He would have liked best to have locked himself up at Headquarters and not come out again for a year. He had failed across the board. He had been too stupid to put two and two together. And the disease Brittany had lied to him about had been with him all along—he had been blind—blinded with love.

Then, a week and a half after the discovery of the paintings, a letter arrived. Jupiter was alone at Headquarters when he opened the blue-lined envelope and pulled out the fine expensive paper.

Dear Jupiter,

Congratulations! You won the game again this time, albeit with more luck than brains. The paintings are back to their original owners (how unfortunate!); another criminal, thanks to your tireless heroism, is behind bars (how wonderful!); but my excellent camouflage has unfortunately been compromised. I am officially among the living again and will have to be a little more careful in the near future.

But if we distance ourselves from these individual events and look at the big picture, then you will surely see what I see. It was close! I almost had you, didn't I? You might not have let Brittany get her hands on the paintings and then handed them over to me. But believe me, I would have found another way to get them into my possession. Not to mention—more valuable than all the paintings in the world is the fact that you got that pain in the ass Baldwin off my back. That guy's been a thorn in my side for a long time. Bregovic is dead, Baldwin is in jail. It looks like a golden age is about to dawn for me!

Thank you, Jupiter Jones, for your active support in this matter! Brittany sends her love, by the way. She said she really liked you. She said you were a smart kid. Well, I always knew that. Remember? Even then, when we first met, I asked you if you'd like to work alongside me. You said no then. Also the second and third time, you remained true to your moral principles of right and justice.

But just between you and me, you've gone soft this time, haven't you? This time your morality, which I was almost ready to accept as unshakable, was shaken. You were willing to go against the law. Surely you will counter this accusation that you did not want to do it for your own benefit, but solely for Brittany's. You wanted to do a good deed! But if you are honest with yourself, Jupiter, you will have to admit that in the end you would have done it all for yourself. After all, love is nothing but boundless selfishness.

You have grown weak, Jupiter Jones. You were willing to sacrifice your ideals for your selfishness. And with all the successes and failures in this little episode, I make no secret of the fact that I would like to call this my greatest triumph—you have become weak and have taken a look at the other side of temptation.

The first step has been taken. I am curious to see how far you will go next time. Because there will be a next time. I'm sure there will be.

Victor Hugenay

For a long time Jupiter stared into space and gave in to the echo of Hugenay's words in his head. Then his eyes narrowed in grim determination.

He crumpled the letter into a small ball, threw it into the waste basket and muttered: "I'm looking forward to it."